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The Animation of Framing Devices in Contemporary Text-based Theatre

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The Animation of Framing Devices in Contemporary Text-based Theatre

by
Tim Maddock

University of Wollongong, 2019

Exegesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Creative Arts

In the
Law, Humanities and the Arts
School of the Arts, English, and Media

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2019

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DECLARATION

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Timothy J Maddock

ABSTRACT

Central to both the practical and written components of this project is a consideration of the *theatrical frame*. It functions as both a literal and metaphorical device in the submitted production of *Like a Fishbone* by Anthony Weigh (2010). The creative component supports the contention developed in the exegesis that text-based Realism in contemporary theatre and performance is being reinvigorated through framing devices that focus and differentiate potential meanings within written texts and interrogate convention-based approaches to stage design. Throughout the exegesis, framing devices are characterised as strategies for problem solving, as well as providing a place and a space for a plurality of texts or voices, and for the locating of specific discourses.

The exegesis is itself framed by the tension between the director's role as an interpreter of a writer's intentions and the wider responsibility for all of the theatrical parameters - sound, space, time, and the performer's body. Throughout, I describe how these latter aesthetic principles have shaped my work practices through the animation of framing.

The exegesis begins with an account of the submitted creative work, the production of *Like a Fishbone*. It links the experimentation with framing devices in this production to the needs of a particular text, but the directorial approach is contextualised by parallel instances of framing prevalent in the work of contemporary Australian directors, many of whom have been influenced by post-1990 German theatre.

After this initial contextualisation of the creative research, the exegesis expands the discussion of theatrical framing devices into four major chapters: The Frame as Mirror, a consideration of the metaphor of theatre as mirror; Bordering Frames, explores the divisions that define the relationship between audience and performer; Framing Meaning looks at the curation of ideas and texts, and Frames within Frames examines the doubled frame and meta-theatricality.

Each of the chapters adds a background context to the framing decisions in the creative research project *Like a Fishbone*. To provide depth, they refer to prior

productions: accounting for the development and genealogy of the application of the frame in my work; and to similar devices employed by other contemporary practitioners. Key formative productions are presented as case studies to illustrate each chapter.

The conclusion draws together the four frames outlined in the chapters and shows how they are interconnected within the creative work. Finally, I will address some recent pedagogical work which has continued to be influenced by this practice-based research project and uses framing devices to intervene in the rapidly changing discussion around theatre and scenography. This work aims at creating a theatre that is responsive to the social and cultural evolutions of today.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In 2010 I commenced this creative doctorate as a member of a forum of artists working in the university sector without the benefits of a doctoral qualification. The forum, known as the Senior Artists Research Forum (SARF), was created as an engine of support and mutual encouragement amongst its members from a variety of disciplines. What I didn't apprehend at the time was that I would spend the next eight years in reflection on my own artistic past through the lens of a creative research project in an attempt to make coherent sense of what might at first have appeared to me as a series of random strategies in making contemporary theatre. Warm thanks to Diana Wood Conroy our forum leader and supervisor whose encouragement was mercilessly positive. I acknowledge the role of the former Dean of the Faculty of the Arts, English and Media, Amanda Lawson and the support of the University of Wollongong in giving me some relief from teaching in order to advance this thesis, and to Brogan Bunt and Guy Davidson for providing me with a direction towards completion. Special thanks to friend and mentor Julie Holledge, for her assistance and support, and to my Research Assistant Sanja Simic for the invaluable work on editing and proofreading. Credit for the final work on editing goes to Deborah Jenkin.

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INTRODUCTION

While remaining committed to working on theatre based on play texts my fascination had always been situated in companies and individuals who managed to excite audiences by disrupting the conventions of the theatre experience. Naturalism in the theatre has evolved over the years into being the epitome of a culturally staid and conservative theatre, a far cry from its origin as a disruptor in the first half of the twentieth century. By embarking on a practice based DCA I wanted to experiment with framing devices, animated through a professional practice developed over twenty years, for their value as disruptors of the aesthetic fabric of theatre presented in a mainstream context. In a media saturated age, it can be contended that the future liveliness of theatre relies on aesthetic play, and that playfulness is key to its sustenance and maintenance.

The solutions to the staging of *Like a Fishbone* drew on a web of interconnections with a number of prior productions I have worked on, their specific theatrical problems and their solutions. Given the pressure of deadlines in bringing this new work to stage, I knew in advance that some areas of experimentation, especially those regarding alternate approaches to acting, would be limited.

Was the experiment a success? I find this difficult to answer as the reception of any production is difficult to assess and analyse and different individuals can read the intended meaning of any theatrical work in ways that may be contradictory. But this multiplicity can be seen as part of the beauty of the theatre experience. The effort to communicate a complex web of meanings through multiple forms and intertextuality, through collaboration with many players, is not diffused or diluted by the knowledge of the refractory and slippery nature of the interaction.

While combining research with a professional ‘gig’ excited me, I acknowledge and recognise the difficulty of pursuing active experimentation outside an alternative theatre context. This is acknowledged within the exegesis that deals primarily with a period of time around the production of *Like a Fishbone*, reaching back to trace and define its lineage. Not only are the boundaries between research and production blurred within the process described, the exegesis also challenges assumptions that lie behind commonly held artistic hierarchies. These include industrial hierarchies,

regarding the distribution of powers, as well as an aesthetic hierarchy that would place words and textual meaning above space, sound, light and visibility. In *Like a Fishbone*, as in my early work, I rejected the notion of the direct transmission of meaning, of a theatre with a message, preferring to think of the job of the director as the creation of a context within which a series of actions, events, and relations occur, and where one becomes a spectator alongside other spectators. As French philosopher Rancière (2009, p.22) suggests:

Like researchers, artists construct the stages where the manifestation and effect of their skills are exhibited, rendered uncertain in the terms of the new idiom that conveys a new intellectual adventure. The effect of the idiom cannot be anticipated. It requires spectators who play the role of active interpreters, who develop their own translation in order to appropriate the ‘story’ and make it their own story. An emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators.

Collaborating with playwrights has been an important aspect of my work as a director, and this is also the case with the research component of *Like a Fishbone*. All the case-studies cited in this exegesis as relevant to this production involved working with writers in new ways and resulted in long standing artistic liaisons not only with them but with other creative collaborators. Artistic relationships with playwrights require attention not only to textual interpretation, but also negotiation on how the words will function alongside spatial, gestural and aural language. As Daniel Keene, one of my long-term collaborators has reasoned:

‘[t]he play [a playwright] writes is always a new proposal for the theatre. It is an imaginative act that suggests something beyond the play itself and contains the possibility for new forms of theatre’ (2007, p.7).

I share his desire to engage differently with text, to treat the script as an equal part of the production alongside all other artistic elements, in a search for a new poetics of theatre. This requires a reinvigoration of the language of theatre and a restless re-examination of working habits. Yet Keene’s work still relies on dramatic conventions of narrative and inter-personal dialogue. He, and another of my past collaborators,

Howard Barker, are poets as well as playwrights, using language to surface the unspoken and make connections across an unacknowledged divide, but it is not their lyricism that makes the work interesting, it is the gaps that open within and through their texts, which are not bound by literality and rationality, or by the sterile calculations of cause and effect. Keene again:

Theatre has its own language, of which literature is an important part. But that language is not limited to literature. As Jean Cocteau once stated, he was dead against poetry in the theatre, but all for a poetry of the theatre.
(Keene 2007, p.6)

The idea has persisted throughout the twentieth century of rediscovering the potency of theatre through its formal relations, and its contract with an audience. Theatre progresses and mutates largely through experiment, including in forms of audience engagement. It is precisely because the audience has a received notion about the codes and conventions of the theatre that its deconstruction is possible. The underlying theatrical premise for this deconstruction exists in modernist as well as post-modern theatrical practice. Adolphe Appia writing in 1922 in his essay *Monumentality* provides a critique of a heritage-based culture of the arts which has prioritised the building of theatres over contemporary work:

A theatre is monumental when its construction exhausts all the available finance, leaving nothing for the presentation of good productions, which, after all, were the sole purpose of the building and should have been given priority.
(1922, p.137)

In his writing Appia foregrounded the word 'life' in art and the living body in theatre and laid the foundations for a reconstruction of a theatre which activated audiences.

The theatre, as it has been understood, has schooled the spectator in passivity; therefore, it can no longer serve a modern audience. What part of the theatre encourages audience passivity? Undoubtedly, the actors. The position given the actors directly influences the spectator, and we must begin by changing

this position. Its most characteristic quality is the remoteness of the actor from the audience. (1922, p.138)

I first encountered Appia's writing as a drama student while engaging in experimentation with new ways of creating performance spaces. It introduced me to new ways of engaging in theatre that loosened the knots of convention and in which space and its articulation became paramount. In the eighties, I took part in two large-scale site-specific works that used installation and promenade experimentally¹; thirty years later these forms are an accepted part of the theatre's vocabulary. Productions such as *Sleep No More* by Punchdrunk, where audiences can follow any strand of a split narrative articulated more through the actor's physical expression than through the spoken word. Staged in non-theatre venues with multiple levels, it engages performers and audience at times in one-on-one encounters demonstrating that what was once alternative can become successful entrepreneurial venture and part of mainstream artistic practice.

The experimental work of the last half of the twentieth century together with the influence of postmodern theory has changed art and theatre, leading to a proliferation of forms, a fragmentation of dramatic unities and a position of ironic detachment. The changes wrought by postmodern approaches call into question presumptions regarding form and correspondences with the real; Aronson (2005, p.85) argues that the art of the postmodern reflected the dissipation and lack of coherence of a millennial society:

This is a style in which any coherence that exists is that of the frame or of formal structures; there is little identifiable correspondence with the natural world. It is a style in which objects are intended to stimulate desire and longing—to make the blood flow faster—and yet, because these are unreal images, the desire leads to frustration. These are unattainable objects. So the new style is one of coldness or false warmth, alienation, fragmentation, and loss.

¹ *The Burra Project* (1986) and *Under Southern Eyes* (1988) site specific works directed by Julie Holledge and scenography by Mary Moore

Yet despite Aronson's reservations, theories of the postmodern have played a significant role in an increasing re-engagement with the conventions of theatre and a new understanding of the importance of the frame and of framing devices. Perhaps the fragmentation of 'correspondences with the natural world' liberates theatre and allows it to be a place for speculation. Hans Thies- Lehmann's term "post-dramatic theatre" intends to refine the terminology in describing a vast range of practices some of which have turned their attention once again to the machineries of power, real-world politics and strategies of resistance.

Lehmann describes how the rough handling of the classics by post-dramatic practitioners is likely to cause howls of rage from those who see them as heritage arts and would keep them as objects in a museum, and yet '[t]he tradition of the written text is under more threat from museum-like conventions than from radical forms dealing with it' (Lehmann 2006, p.52). Theatre in the past one hundred years has been challenged by the rise of other media, particularly cinema and television, and this has created a necessary tension that has in turn led to a constant state of innovation. Whilst it may be argued that the site of innovation has been in the rise of a theatricality separate from writing, writing for theatre is now more likely to consider the way words interact with the other elements of theatricality. As Lehmann asserts: 'The challenge to discover new potencies of the art of the theatre has become an essential dimension of writing for theatre' (2006, p.50).

The context for the scope of research in the production of *Like a Fishbone* was the culmination of my practice of a director working with the poetic play texts of Keene and Barker, and the desire to extend the application of modernist and post-dramatic theatre aesthetics. I began my enquiry convinced that theatre writing is experienced as the embodied speech act, that the mediation of the word through form is a potential challenge to the authority of the writer and to the symbolising function of language. Seen from new perspectives, language systems can reveal their contradictions, their replicating function, and their hidden or active intent. The fascination with the disruptive potential of re-framing text-based theatre was the motivation behind my research. The staging of *Like a Fishbone* constitutes the practical component of this DCA thesis and is the core case study of this exegesis that considers the use of

theatrical framing and its function as a literal and metaphoric device in the production of a text-based work of contemporary realism. I define theatrical framing as follows:

Literal framing

By literal framing I am referring to the appearance of literal frames within the frame of the stage and to any mechanism that separates the audience from the performance, traditionally imposed by the proscenium arch. The literal frame may appear as a device to enact this separation while bringing attention to itself and a self-awareness of its function in the division and condition of separateness. The repudiation of the proscenium arch does not release the work from its frame but shifts the frame to the disposition of the stage and its manner of inscribing performance space, as Aronson astutely acknowledges:

While a proscenium-type stage may possess a very literal frame, any stage, no matter how it is configured, no matter what its architectural relation to the audience, always constitutes a frame. A frame is a form of visual organization; it creates a self-contained space carefully delineated from the world around it. (Aronson 2011, p.90)

Metaphoric framing devices

The specific articulation of the frame in order to stimulate an audience to associate and make connections to their own cultural referents. I will describe the attempt to create a space for audiences in the metaphoric and metonymic aspect of the frame to construct meanings through associative linking and imaginative contemplation. By manipulating the material engagement of audience and performance a doubled experience of theatre as a thing in itself and a machine of representation is manifested. The theatre is always actual as well as metaphoric, metaphoric framing devices employ the liminal space and tensions between presentational and representational modes in the creation of conceptual territory.

These devices differ from the notion of creating a 'setting' for the written text (derived from the apparent themes and locales of the written text with the aim of building the fictional world of the play) in that they are asking the audience to make transpositional leaps, to enter into the process of making meaning, to experience the

contingency of this 'mirror of reality'. The metaphoric framing may occur in several ways, firstly through a construction of the spatial relations between audience and performers. For example, does the event-framing resemble a community hall, a court of law? This event-framing can involve any number of elements including spatiality, type of seating, proximal relations, audience management (ticketing, ushering). Secondly the stage as a metaphor through its dimensions, materials, mechanics. Thirdly, through the choice and distribution of objects that inhabit the stage, including set pieces and costume. And last but not least, the complex interplay of performer, object, space, light and dark, sound and music.

Once there is a stage, an actor and an observer, there is metaphor; whatever happens on this stage is already metaphoric. By 'metaphoric framing' I intend that a work of orchestration, of curation, of accumulation has happened in order to lead an audience to a site of potentiality, a site where puzzles are made not solved. Frames that are metaphoric and metonymic in their function provide a space for an audience to fabricate, to speculate, to link and connect signs to their own cultural knowledge and perception of reality. They can cause an awareness of the separateness of the space of performance, and therefore of the watching act, the gap between the world of the watcher and that of the watched, a gap that is constitutive of the metaphorical leap of imagination.

The case studies cited in this exegesis chart the implementation of these framing strategies in an approach to realist text that eschews conventional staging in order to contextualise discourse, establish audience and performer relations, establish interplay between the literal and metaphoric, and disrupt notions of the stage as a simple mirror of reality. Before considering the framing devices that emerged from my creative research with *Like a Fishbone*, I will begin by contextualising my research more squarely in contemporary Australian theatre practice by considering how framing devices are being used by our leading directors and situate their work within recent developments in European theatre practice.

Currently, in Australia, we are experiencing a proliferation in the mainstream of aesthetic practices spawned in the alternative scene. The works of Barrie Kosky, Benedict Andrews and more recently Simon Stone display a familiarity with the

practices and aesthetic principles of companies whose work is often showcased at major Australian arts festivals and resemble the impulse of German theatre director Thomas Ostermeier in revisiting the classics armed with a new aesthetic vocabulary. This return to traditional canonical plays was born partly from a political reaction to a post-modern theatre which Ostermeier believed was overly reflexive, and which portrayed an individual no longer capable of action. A manifesto launching the tenure of Ostermeier and Sasha Walz at Schaubühne in Berlin states:

We need a new realism, because realism counters a 'false consciousness', which these days is much more a lack of any consciousness. Realism is not the simple depiction of the world as it looks. It is a view on the world with an attitude that demands change. (Delgado & Rebellato 2010, p.345)

While Ostermeier asserts the validity and even the necessity for a new realism, broadly speaking the shift in focus in contemporary theatre practice has generally been towards a perception of theatre as a visual and spatial art form, a shift in emphasis from interpretation of character and story to considerations of space, audience positioning, and the redefinition of aesthetic parameters. Ostermeier has played a part in this redefinition but also in the insistence on a theatre that speaks clearly from a position demanding political change.

Even more recently, in the Australian mainstream we have witnessed a move back to a theatre of spectacle, a highly visual and at times highly mediatised theatre. This is in part due to the influence of British director Katie Mitchell, who brings to the conservative British mainstream theatre devices more commonly associated with continental European productions. Yet, despite the shifting aesthetic parameters that disrupt traditional theatre conventions, the written text survives and is brought back into contemporary consciousness due to the attention these revivals of the canon receive.

This exegesis argues that the return to text has stimulated a new aesthetic of theatrical framing and that this use of theatrical frames results in the creation of new layers of signification, making connections to the themes and ideas of the written text, but not embodying it. These framing devices often work through juxtaposition and

contradiction causing a re-evaluation of the written text. The way we see the world is already framed by myriad cultural impressions and pre-existing narratives. Theatrical framing devices employed primarily by directors and scenographers can disrupt the patterns of looking at, or seeing the world and in doing so, create a potential for disrupting the audience's way of making the world.

The emergence of framing devices in the re-invigoration of contemporary theatre staging needs to be considered in the context of the roles of the director and scenographer, as they have developed and come to be defined in the course of twentieth century theatre practice, because it is in the convergence of the theatrical skills seen as particular to each role where this practice comes into effect.

The theatre brings together numerous voices, a construction of many disciplines, each requiring a degree of autonomy and freedom from constraint, and yet traditionally the task of the director is to conduct this polyphony so that there is a shape and sense; even in the most formally radical work there is still form and orchestration. The 20th Century saw the rise of the director, a role that had previously been adopted by leading actors, company managers, or producers. Directors such as Peter Brook, Max Reinhardt and Elia Kazan, to mention only a few, came to be regarded as auteurs at a cost, some would argue, to the status of writers of great renown. These directors were artists writing with bodies and objects in space, painting with light, and sculpting with time, not functionaries charged with the interpretation and implementation of the writer/author's will. Rabkin (2002, p.329) asserts that:

[I]n the dominant hierarchical model in Western culture the performance text is offered as an interpretation - a reading - of the dramatic text. The rise of 'director's theatre' mirrors literary criticism's movement from the emphasis upon the immanent 'meaning' of literary texts to the acceptance of the processes of reading and interpretation, which determine reading.

This change of attention towards the director's power to 'authorise' the 'meaning' of a script awards him or her a special authority as high priest or wizard who can turn mysterious signs into palpable and affecting experiences. The Swedish stage and film director, Ingmar Bergman, exposes this idea of the director as shaman in his film *The*

Face (1958) through the metaphor of the magician, whose meanings are a mere trick of deception achieved through ‘misdirection’. Vogler, the magician, destroys the rationalist scepticism of the doctor, Vergérus, by appearing to bring a dead man back to life. Bergman’s ‘magician’ corrupts the idea of the director as a god-like creator; instead he is merely an effect of makeup and his art a series of mechanically produced tricks. Bergman claims: ‘I have no need of power. I have no need to be influential. I have no need to be a participant in, or a shaper of, Swedish cultural life’ (Lothwall 2007, p.61). The magician of Bergman’s film carries the knowledge of the trick of the illusion as a heavy burden. The mandate of contemporary theatre is to expose the tricks of illusionism, to draw back the curtain, to reveal the doubling nature of theatre that shadows rather than mirrors life.

While Bergman appears to be rejecting the perception of the director as a social and cultural leader, a quasi-priest, he maintains that it is the director’s job to take the audience by the hand and lead them to the dark places where they might fear to go unassisted: ‘I have no answers; I just pose questions’ (Lothwall 2007, p.88). If there is an answer to the question, then this is the work of the audience. Directors aim to organise chaos, to find associations, links and patterns, to distil attention, create a focus. The American director Anne Bogart (2001, p.81) regards it as a duty of art to restore to life an original fear, reminding us that:

We are born in terror and trembling. In the face of our terror before the uncontrollable chaos of the universe, we label as much as we can with language in the hope that once we have named something we need no longer fear it. This labelling enables us to feel safer but also kills the mystery in what has been labelled, removing the life and danger from what has been defined. The artist’s responsibility is to bring the potential, the mystery and terror, the trembling, back.

Bergman’s unmasking of the magician Vogler is an ironic self-reflexive reminder of the theatre as a place of pretending, of play-acting the living and the dead, and the invisible border between them. Daniel Keene writes that: ‘Theatre is what connects these two things; theatre is where our lives are stretched tight across this gap—a gap as narrow as a fingernail, as broad as an ocean’ (Keene 2007, p.14).

In discussing the mutating function of the director, it is vital to acknowledge the developing awareness of the centrality of scenography in theatre practice. The title of scenographer and the description of a practice of scenography are relatively recent phenomena arising from the need to describe a creative function in theatre arts that extends beyond the narrow boundaries of terms such as *set design*, *costume design* and *lighting design* and encompasses all the practices which together constitute scenic writing. Aronson explains: 'It carries a connotation of an all-encompassing visual-spatial construct as well as the process of change and transformation that is an inherent part of the physical vocabulary of the stage' (2005, p.7). There is common agreement on the necessity for a term that more accurately describes 'the total creation of the stage including the visual direction of the performers' (Backemeyer 2003, p.102). More than designers of the visual world of the play, scenographers can determine the meaning of a play, or, more accurately conceptualise through design. British scenographer Ralph Koltai stresses the importance of a conceptual approach to design: 'I'm totally concerned with concept ... I don't like to 'design scenery' ... Once I have an idea I get excited. Then it becomes a problem of making it work' (Burian 1983, p.221).

Christopher Baugh, in *Theatre Performance and Technology*, writes of the origins of the idea of scenography as a machine for performance, citing the influences of the ideas of Appia, Meyerhold and Neher who, in their desire to 'conceive of the stage as a performance construction, initiated the exposure of the technology of its expression' (2013, p.46). Baugh (2013, p.47) goes on to state:

The metaphor, and the implications, of the scene as machine still have considerable contemporary relevance, and it will be useful to look at the work of Josef Svoboda and his concern for the 'material reality of the stage' as in some way representing a culmination of modernist scenographic ambitions during the twentieth century.

Svoboda believes that a setting should not attempt to distil the core essence of a play in a single image but rather the setting should evolve with the action, cooperate with it, be in harmony with it, and reinforce it, as the action itself evolves. Theatre scholar Jarka Burian, in highlighting Svoboda's contribution to the history of scenography,

notes that: ‘Scenography is not a background nor even a container, but in itself a dramatic component that becomes integrated with every other expressive component or element of production and shares in the cumulative effect upon the viewer’ (1970, pp.126–27).

Undoubtedly the tasks of director and scenographer overlap and at times are indistinguishable, both being responsible for the conceptual wholeness of a production and the interactions between performer and audience. Yet this overlapping of responsibilities need not be cause for confusion or concern; this doubling of artistic and practical responsibility can be the source of great creative achievement. In *The Theatricality of Robert Lepage*, Dundjerovic asserts that ‘developments in contemporary practice necessitate a different understanding of the creative process, one that blurs the boundaries between writer, director, actors, audience, and forms of expression’ (2007, p.35). This speaks to a specific kind of contemporary work whose processes are often interdisciplinary and in which the written play text is no longer the originary moment.

This exegesis accepts the premise that it is possible and perhaps desirable to combine elements of the craft of the director and the scenography into a single role, questioning the popularly received idea of the director’s responsibility as being the interpretation of a writer’s text and the instruction of the actors in the delivery of their lines and their location on stage. By foregrounding scenography as an attribute of direction, the creative research of *Like a Fishbone* questions how the director’s role has been perceived in the past, both as a figure of authority and as an artistic participant in theatre production. German theorist Peter M. Boenisch (2015, p.8), in his introduction to *Directing Scenes and Senses: The Thinking of Regie*, urges:

We should not forget that describing the director as ‘auteur’ was once an emancipatory and somewhat radical proposition in itself...theatre directors began to challenge the status of theatre as cultural capital of a middle-class elite... To remain truthful, as theatre critics and theatre-makers, to the vision of directors and playwrights who imagine theatre as a vital critical force engaged with contemporary society, we must first of all stop pondering whether playwright or director should have superior authority.

The intention behind my consideration of an approach to theatre direction, in which considerations of spatiality, interaction between performer and audience, and visual and auditory elements rank equally alongside written texts, is not to seek a new and singular definition of theatre direction, but to re-consider and expand the terms by which this practice is understood. And in so doing accept the diversity that characterises the approaches of its practitioners in addressing an ever-changing political, cultural and social landscape

The shift in the demarcation of skills involved in the production process for theatre cannot be dissociated from a changing regard to the authority of the script and the conventions of realist staging. Richard Schechner (2000, p.6), director and editor of *The Drama Review*, describes ‘a new viability’ of spoken word drama due to the revitalising of the conventions that surround it:

What this means is that just as Shakespeare can be done in any style, so can Ibsen [...]. Play texts of whatever kind are detached from their possible stagings and acting styles. In other words, the concept of ‘text’ has indeed been broadened and operates now not only academically but in actual performance work. There is the text of plays; but there is also the text of behaviour, of acting, of scenography, of blocking.

Schechner goes on to argue in the same paper for the ‘autonomous’ identity of each textual element, for ‘disparity, contradiction, and the interplay of forces, a totality without the requirement of unity’ (2000, p.6). What is being proposed here is that, far from being dead, spoken word theatre is alive and well, and that ironically it may have been given the kiss of life by those seen as its ardent detractors. Directors, who once deconstructed the classics in order to expose their function within a broader cultural context, effectively tearing texts apart to reveal their inner workings, have returned to the same texts with a new respect and regard. The aesthetic framing principles brought to these classic texts will still be regarded as an outrage among traditionalists and supporters of the ‘heritage arts’ and yet ironically contemporary approaches to ancient texts has resurrected them. Contemporary theatre has been characterised by two impulses in equal measure: an impulse towards deconstruction

and the dismantling of the scaffolds of traditional theatre convention, and a countering impulse of preservation, towards traditionalism and conservatism. In his dissertation, arguing for a theatre liberated from writing and the spoken word, Lehmann (2006, p.46) states that:

The historical drifting apart of text and theatre demands an unprejudiced redefinition of their relationship. It proceeds from the reflection that theatre existed first: arising from ritual, taking up the form of mimesis through dance, and developing into a full-fledged behaviour and practice before the advent of writing.

This restless challenge to the language base of theatre has paralleled contemporary challenges in the social and political sphere, as if theatre were a rehearsal for transformative practices in the actual world. While this might seem to inflate the socio-political importance of theatre, it is a critical acknowledgement of the power of theatre to speculate and to transgress delimiting codes through play and metaphor.

The desire to shake loose from the productive hegemonies of meaning transmission has led to a move away from the unities and coherences that have been the hallmark of naturalistic drama. The term ‘postdramatic’ describes a theatre no longer reliant on narrative or character and instead characterised by:

[T]he concern among directors and practitioners to break out of the straitjacket of *re-presentation*, which is to say, of the obligation to reproduce an already written story, even a series of historical events, and beyond that a ‘fictive cosmos’ that is governed by pre-ordained conventions—perhaps even ‘laws’—of psychological motivation, causal connection, and coherent conceptual meaning more generally. (Jürs-Munby, Carroll & Giles 2013, p.4)

Lehmann paints a white line between divergent practices. He describes a bifurcating theatre: on the one side an entirely re-contemporised presentational theatre, eschewing character and narrative, and on the other a representational one that continues to engage with written texts of the theatre with narrative and character and psychological motivation.

We are currently witnessing a return to the dramatic and to plays from the canon reinvigorated by re-framing practices that in turn have emerged from decades of experimentation with forms. As Schechner (2000, p.44) observes, the theatre survives, and in many guises:

For a long time I bemoaned the “death of theatre,” predicting that theatre would be the “string-quartet of the 21st century.” Well the 21st century is here, and so is theatre. I was wrong.

In this exegesis I employ the work of three key theorists as well as numerous practitioners who write convincingly and engagingly about their craft and about the ideas that drive their work. In the field of scenography, I explore the work of American theatre historian Arnold Aronson, whose book *Looking into the Abyss* (2011) informs a philosophical inquiry into the function of the stage as both frame and dark abyss, a place of looking which also looks back. French philosopher Jacques Rancière in *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009) provides an essential critique of the politics of the spatial interaction between audience and performer. Rancière has decoupled theatre theory from its certainty about spectatorship; in doing so he allows a new consideration of the audience in their engagement with theatre. In considering the impacts of recent movements in contemporary theatre, I am indebted to the work of German theorist Hans-Thies Lehmann, which maps the shift away from dramatic conventions. A primary source of creative friction in theatre production is the dialectic between the old and the new and this friction is the source of energy keeping the theatre alive. This dialectic is apparent in the work of contemporary Australian directors—some of whom have returned to the text but used framing devices to bring a post-dramatic critique to a classic text—and in every case they blur the line of conventional distinctions between direction and design.

In Simon Stone’s production of *Thyestes* (2010), adapted from Seneca by Caryl Churchill, the written text itself becomes a frame for an entirely contemporary performance of everyday human existence. Surtitles above the stage describe the events of the Senecan original in each scene, freeing the performance from a re-telling of the narrative. The events onstage are domestic in nature and at odds with the

surtitle descriptions. The stage is a white rectangular box located between two halves of the audience seated in traverse with screens which come down between scenes, Alison Croggon in her review for *Theatre Notes* describes the effect:

When the blinds that serve as curtains are down, as they are between every scene, it's impossible to see the audience on the other side: each new scene reveals the audience as well as the actors. This becomes increasingly disconcerting, because one of the paradoxical effects of this show is to erase distances: between *then* and *now*, *them* and *us*, the actors and ourselves.
(2010)

Thyestes, an ancient classic, has been used to tell a story of here and now dealing with interfamilial violence and taboo. In this case contemporary framing is not in the employ of the classics, to breathe new life into them, it is the frame of the classics breathing life into modern realism. It is through the framing of the domestic with the operatic scale of the classics that a formalised, yet graphic depiction of excessive violence is sustainable. Stone's contribution has been to re-invigorate a hyper-naturalistic style of acting through theatrical framing. The banality of the everyday is seen through a lens of the acts of gross extremity of the classical tragedy, in turn contextualising acts of contemporary incest and cruelty within a shared understanding of myth.

Barrie Kosky was one of the first Australian directors to bring to the mainstream audience a postdramatic aesthetic. His production of *The Women of Troy* (2008), adapted from Euripides by Kosky and Thomas Wright, was framed by an aesthetic drawn directly from Abu Ghraib. A chorus of five women sing, Rebecca Whitton in her review, describes the experience:

The music is deeply affecting. The women sing an eclectic range of songs including haunting eastern European folk songs, madrigals, Mozart and Bizet and the war time stoic's favourite, 'When You're Smiling'. They sing to raise themselves above their experiences and as an expression of their terrible grief. It has a similar effect upon the audience, alleviating the intensity of the action.
(2008)

This representation of the casual brutality of war countered with expressions of artistic beauty caused a deep shock in the audience. John McCallum writes:

At the end of the performance a sullenly professional prison guard, who has been packaging up the raped women into cardboard boxes and shipping them off for the Greeks' pleasure back home, takes out a gun and shoots the Chorus which has been the only source of beauty in the production. You don't kill the Chorus! You kill the protagonists, the leaders, the individuals, but in classical Greek tragedy you don't kill ordinary people. It was a deeply shocking moment for me, because it rang so true. That's what happens in modern warfare. (2010)

Kosky breaks the rules of the code of theatre to re-invest a possible media-saturated audience with the shock of war. The chorus who conventionally act to frame the action and mediate the audiences' perception are dragged into the maw of action and killed.

Benedict Andrews' production of Patrick White's *Season at Sarsaparilla* (2007) deals with the representation of Australian suburban existence in the 1950's. The audience watch the action unfold through the windows of a typical suburban house of the period;

His most inspired decision, however, is to locate the action within a single house. Where White specified that the action was to take place in three back yards, Andrews has the different families criss-crossing one kitchen, as we watch them through three huge windows. (Croggon 2010)

An entire mock-up of a house was centred on a revolving stage, cameras and microphones were used to amplify and distort image and audio, and large screens displayed projected images from inside the house. The staging heightened the sense of watching or peering into the lives of others, bringing a dramatic relation to the consumption of what should and shouldn't be seen. Robert Cousins, designer, acknowledged his debt to German designer Jan Pappelbaum. Andrews' early work

emphasised the divisions between audience and performers often placing the performers behind walls of Perspex or within glass boxes. In this manner the social relations of the theatre event are made explicit, the interactions made to appear strange and unfamiliar. In her review Croggon brings into focus the function of Andrews' devices, to both paradoxically distance and to bring close the actions of the characters:

Cameras dotted, *Big Brother*-style, inside the house, heighten [the] sense of voyeurism. It permits us to witness moments of almost unbearable privacy: we see characters in grotesque close-up—eating dinner, showering, contemplating their reflections in the mirror—even as we watch them in the flesh on stage.
(2007)

This was a clear instance of the dust being blown off the wings of a classic piece of Australian theatre writing, as well as a challenge to the mainstream and its aesthetic of comforting conventions. The production interfered with habits of looking and through this re-alienation of the contract of looking brings into play potentially disturbing ethical considerations.

More recently in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, adapted by Thomas Wright (2016), Matthew Lutton similarly took an Australian classic and held it up in a new light, in a staging of the novel by Joan Lindsay, a tall story of mythic dimension of the disappearance into the Australian landscape of a group of Victorian era schoolgirls. The stage design featured panelled walls, an imposing wardrobe and carpet in tones of dark blueish grey, actor's appearances happened as if by magic in total blackouts. The scenography placed the artefacts of European culture at odds with the natural landscape, and the sound world of the production amplified the threat of the natural world, reproducing the psychic disturbance that characterised the Australian colonial experience. The first section of the performance involved the actors standing static onstage, reading the story to the audience before they began to physically adopt the multiple roles of the narrative. The aesthetic choices framed a clash of worlds, the natural with the civil, acculturated world creating a sense of dislocation and anxiety, leading an audience to focus on the psychosexual nature of the fear of otherness.

These few studies represent instances in which the mode of presentation or the strategies of representation are differentiated from conventional expectation such that the audience experience is marked as much by the form, or where the viewing context is dislocated to create new viewing angles and therefore potentially new terrains of meaning. The practitioners all work from a respect for the originating texts but employ strategies of intervention refusing the easy consumption and digestion of their art and requiring work on the part of any audience in the reconciliation of the frictions and discontinuities they have witnessed.

Like a Fishbone presented a research opportunity in which I was able to draw on my previous experiences in direction and scenography to apply strategies regarding the implementation of framing devices in the attempt to challenge observed practices of creating and viewing text-driven theatre. The practical component of this research acknowledges that strategies of framing have become a recognisable and crucial element in the process of constructing meaningful encounters between viewers and performers of contemporary theatre.

The research practice, both in the problem-solving process of the practical component and in the endeavour in this exegesis to identify a methodology, have clarified my thinking and my ability to articulate the development of my practice. It has led to a realisation of the importance of framing devices in my work and through this realisation a liberation from an acceptance and observation of certain conventions of theatre which bring you back to results you might wish to have avoided.

The following chapters which I have named 'Frames' reflect on my past productions as case studies in order to throw light on directorial decision-making in regard to *Like a Fishbone* and to draw a thread between them in order to analyse and articulate in a new way, my practice. These case studies each posed a different set of problems and in discussing these and the solutions to them, I hope to be able to provide a background which will assist in locating the work as embedded in the histories of theatre and in my own continued effort to find a contemporary voice for text-based theatre.

Frame 1: *Like a Fishbone*—describes the process of the period of creative research, the search for an aesthetic language through two distinctly different iterations in the design process. It provides the pivot point to an understanding of an evolving practice

Frame 2: Bordering Frames—considers the proscenium arch as a boundary dividing the audience from performer, the watcher from the watched. It looks at the stage as a frame and how the framing of an event sets a contract of audience engagement and a division between what is perceived as real or representation.

Frame 3: The Frame as Black Mirror—explores the idea of the stage frame as a mirror, but a refractive rather than reflective mirror that distorts and shows back the un-familiar, a mirror that looks back at us.

Frame 4: Frames Within Frames—considers the frame as post-dramatic trope. This chapter examines the literal appearance of frames within the frame of the stage, the meta-theatrical play with the conventions of theatre where the languages and transactions of theatre are metaphors of the economies of actual life.

Frame 5: Framing Meaning—analyses the evolution of the director's role in the curation of a plurality of voices and meanings. I discuss strategies of framing in the contextualising of discursive regimes and consider the possibilities of theatrical intervention in fixed frameworks of seeing the world.

FRAME 1. *LIKE A FISHBONE*

In 2009 Nick Marchand, Artistic Director of Griffin Theatre Company, approached me to direct *Like a Fishbone* by Anthony Weigh in co-production with Sydney Theatre Company. The Bush Theatre in London was also staging the play opening a week prior to the Australian production and therefore Weigh was subject to input on his writing from a number of sources. My task as a director was to work with the final draft of the text as it stood. This limited ability to address problematic areas of representation in the writing, placed special emphasis on the staging. This exegesis accounts for an experimentation in the application of strategies of framing in an attempt to locate the intended and unintended meaning of the play text within an aesthetic context. This context or frame is itself based on culturally embedded signs and defined by a history of artistic representation.

The problematic terrain of the written text, apart from the usual problems of staging, was in its positioning of the role of motherhood as central to the argument polarising the two central characters of the play, one's identity is based on her career the other on traditionalist and religious views of woman as child-bearer and nurturer. The play represents a world in a social and cultural crisis, with conflicted views as to the source of the crisis and the solution for its repair. The context of its polemic has become familiar in recent times, characterised by the 'culture wars' and an increasing tendency towards extreme positions across the political divide. In wanting to declare the ideological nature of their positions I resisted the idea of an overly naturalistic form of representation, and sought a manner of framing the production which encouraged the audience to see the positioning of the women in relation to the argument, not only as an expression of a lived reality.

Like a Fishbone by Anthony Weigh received its Australian Premiere on 20 July 2010 at Wharf 1, Sydney Theatre Company.

The Production Team

Director, Tim Maddock

Set Designer, Jacob Nash

Costume Designer, Bruce McKinven

Lighting Designer, Verity Hampson

Composer & Sound Designer, Steve Francis

Assistant Director, Imara Savage

Production Manager, Terri Richards

Stage Manager, Luke McGettigan

Assistant Stage Manager, Todd Eichorn

Theatre Technician, Cameron Menzies

Actors

The Child, Teneale Clifford

The Architect, Marta Dusseldorp

The Mother, Anita Hegh

The Intern, Aimee Horne

Like a Fishbone is set in the aftermath of a school killing; a man with a gun has taken hostage the children of a small school in rural England. The school is part of a fundamental religious community who live by the Bible's rule, shunning the modern world. The gunman murders the children and the site of the massacre is cordoned off to later become the site of a public memorial. The design of the memorial is put out to tender and is won by a female architect of high standing who intends to engage with the parents of children lost in the massacre as 'stakeholders' in 'a process' that entails consultation and interviews to produce a memorial which is an expression of the collective will of victims of the outrage.

The play's action takes place on the night of the memorial design presentation; the architect arrives at her office to collect the model to take to the presentation but

standing in her room is a blind woman, dripping wet from the rain (LAF, 01:20).² The blind woman named in the play text as ‘Mother’ asks the architect to describe the model which takes the form of an exact preservation of the site as it was on the day of the killing; separated from the viewing public by a glass wall and a car park to accommodate the inevitable tourists (LAF, 07:20).

The Mother demands a different memorial revealing that her daughter was one of the gunman’s victims, her daughter has come to her in the form of a ghost to insist that the intended memorial be stopped (LAF, 16.00). The Architect attempts to explain the importance of the memorial and to justify the decisions around its design, the necessity of confronting the stark and brutal reality of their deaths, but unconvinced by her argument the Mother crushes the model and, after a violent fracas with the Architect, leaves the studio her nose bloodied, cursing the project (LAF, 52.40). The Intern to the Architect arrives to take her to the memorial presentation and attempts to assist in the repair of the model but the Architect declares that there will be no presentation and collapses slowly to the floor, her head in the Intern’s lap (LAF, 57.50). The Intern eventually leaves, after taking the opportunity to express her own opinions about the social function of architecture, which directly counter those of the Architect. Left alone the Architect rings her son who now lives with her ex-husband; her son asks her what she is doing and she describes the model village, her son asks if there are any children in the village and a school, but she denies the existence of a school and declines to mention the massacre of the schoolchildren. Her son then asks her to sing to him, which she does, awkwardly, and the ghost of the dead girl appears framed in a window (LAF, 102:10-106:05).

Like a Fishbone grew initially from an encounter in New York. The playwright, Anthony Weigh, was staying in a hotel opposite the ‘ground zero’ site for five weeks. One morning he wandered over to an exhibition that included a model of the proposed memorial to the 9/11 victims by Michael Arad, *Reflections on Absence*. People had left comments, and one addressed Arad’s planned design for the memorial. Weigh (2010) quotes the comment:

² Subsequent references to the digital recording of *Like a Fishbone* will be indicated by the initials of the title, LAF and a timecode

When I think of my son I look up to the sky. To heaven. Not down to this hole in the ground. My son was a hero. We need something that reaches up to the sky. Not this.

Weigh revealed, in an interview for the STC's *Backstage* magazine his intrigue 'with the bereaved mother's desire to make sense of the senseless. To take a horrific event like 9/11 and turn her son, who was without doubt a victim, into a hero.' But he also posed the question in his program notes to the production how writers who have debunked the God-myth would respond to this woman. 'What would Dawkins, Hitchens, Pullman and the rest say to the bereaved mother of a dead child about her sustaining belief in a God?' His aim as a writer was to 'write a finely poised argument, a thriller that shuttled back and forth across the blade of a knife between two points of view.' Weigh acknowledges a change in his own position as a result, 'I had anticipated that I would come out on the side of the architect whose position is that we must face the truth about death...' but he asks himself 'Why should we have to face the reality of death? Isn't it our very denial of death that gives many of our lives meaning?' This asking of questions in preference to positing answers was an important factor in the consideration of choices in staging the production.

The ground zero site is aptly metaphoric for the theatre stage. In a similar manner, the theatre makes and re-makes itself and its practitioners tussle over the blueprints for new designs. *Like a Fishbone* addresses contemporary preoccupations with terrorism, mass killings and public memorials, and the conflict arising around these events. The subtitle, 'an argument and an architectural model', suggests the play's concern with not only memorials but the role and responsibility of art in the building of a future society, and in doing so it looks back on itself and questions artistic responsibility in representation and the transmission of meaning. The role and responsibility of art in the making of selves and society is the 'argument' of the play, the contention that between pillars of the abstract and the concrete we fabricate our lives.

At the narrative level two women are pitched against each other in a conflict of opinion, a manifestation of two very different worldviews. A third woman, the intern, provides another voice and another view, and the fourth, a girl appears, unspeaking as a ghost. Weigh reflects, 'I realised when I stood back that I'd written a play solely for

women. At every turn men tried to insinuate themselves sneakily into the drama, as men have a way of doing.’ The territory of contested feminisms is central to the play. There are obvious difficulties and pitfalls in attempting to stage an argument between a character with progressive ideas and one with conservative, fundamental Christian beliefs. At the least, the revelation that the Architect is also a mother, who has relinquished the major parenting role to the father, would raise concerns about how the argument between mothering and career are framed. The motif of absent or lost children underlies and informs the play, a dialectic of presence and absence, as between Arad’s *Reflecting Absence* and Libeskind’s *Freedom Tower*. These absent children could too easily be conflated with the idea of a world out of joint, a society that has transgressed the ‘natural order’.

A psychoanalytic or feminist reading of the play expands the discussion from the realm of the cultural and social space to that of collective anxieties about feminine power and sexuality. Barbara Creed, in *The Monstrous Feminine*, argues that women’s power of reproduction is linked fearfully with the reverse of birth, death. An unconscious fear of women as productive of death:

The desires and fears invoked by the image of the archaic mother, as a force that threatens to incorporate what it once gave birth to, are always there [...] all pervasive, all encompassing—because of the constant presence of death. (Creed 1993, p.28)

The play text portrays the Architect as setting a trap, like a Venus flytrap, as a rebuke to the viewing public for its voyeuristic desire in wanting to see the site. Through a preservation of the schoolroom as a crime scene, they would be shocked into an awareness of the human potential for evil, and by extension their own terrifying potential, blurring the distinction between victim and perpetrator. In this way the writer engages the audience in a consideration of the ethical responsibility of the audience and of the artist towards their audience and the relative merit of truth or lies in bringing comfort to human pain. The final provocation at the play’s conclusion is the Architect’s ‘lie’ to her son about the non-existence of a school or children in the village she describes to him. She has changed from a ‘truth at all costs’ position to one of comforting omission.

Theatrical framing devices were central to the creative experiment that was embedded in this production. Using the terminology outlined at the beginning of the chapter, framing was used in the following ways in *Like a Fishbone*: The finished design employed as a literal frame a large constructed frame (an echo of the proscenium arch), which acted as a spatial frame for the Architect's studio with its window and door as a part of its sign system of frames within frames. The large frame of *Like a Fishbone* functions literally and metaphorically, it provides a sense of inside and outside (not only indoors and outdoors), it signifies the world of the Architect, her enclosure, her space, violated by the uninvited presence of the blind Mother. Later in the play it represents the divide between the physical and the metaphysical world, a border between the living and the dead. Constructed as a light box, part of the tool kit of designers and architects, a metonymy for the aesthetic domain of the architect and her 'work in progress'. The stage floor, its border marked with white tape is also a frame, and these interconnected frames connect conceptually with the multiple perspectives expressed by the characters from their archetypical positions.

To focus on the creative research that underpins this exegesis I will give a detailed account of the interpretative thinking that lay behind the use of framing in the design of *Like a Fishbone*. To bring clarity to the process of problem solving and the decision to implement literal and metaphoric framing devices, I will describe two different iterations of the stage designs for *Like a Fishbone*, and the reasoning behind them. The method of staging acknowledges the practical technical requirements of the production and highlights the impact of the choice in materials on the different iterations of the scenic design.

The text, I believed, required an archetypical space, a rationale that accepted and promoted the idea of the play as an argument staged in an arena. The decision was made early with designer Jacob Nash to reduce scenic elements that would support the fiction of an architect's office or to render the dimensionality of the lives of the characters, and instead to highlight singular objects, particular spatial dynamics and significant architectural features. However, the staging had to support certain important physical actions described in the text: for example, the architect attempts repeatedly to open a window and finally out of frustration attacks the window frame

with a screwdriver. The set also needed to facilitate the comings and goings, the entrances and exits of the actors, so a door or opening would be required. The problem was how to achieve a balance between a space that supported the action of the play and a metaphoric space, a landscape of ideas. The interplay between the material and non-material elements of framing creates a site of convergence where otherwise random and chaotic impressions might condense into systems of signification.

The play's opening stage directions describe, '*Winter rain against a large window.*' (2010, p.1) The window as motif accumulates in importance and acquires significance through its description and its use. It is not an arbitrary sign, and it becomes a locus of potential meanings. The daughter's ghost appears at the window towards the end of the play, forming chains of association: window as mirror, as portal, as closure and as a border between the living and the dead. In the play's opening moments, the Mother appears, wet through, and in the closing moments the daughter's ghost appears, drenched from a river. Water is a sign with multiple cultural referents; the breaking of a woman's waters in childbirth; the passage from life to death, the river of life, the river Styx; as rain on the window, associated with tears or sadness. An early idea for the design, an unframed sheet of glass with water streaming down it, was abandoned due to budgetary constraints and our attention moved to other materials that preoccupy architects, materials that deny decay: stone, marble, and concrete. However, throughout numerous iterations in the design process, the window retained its centrality as a primary metaphoric figure.

The First Iteration

The first line of dialogue in the play establishes the split between the two principal characters. The blind Mother expects that the architect who she awaits is a man; MOTHER: Are you a lady? [*Pause.*] Hello? (LAF, 01:23).

Architects have been culturally elevated to the position of high priests of the utopian; they negotiate our social interactions, our proximities, and our separations. Perhaps the esteem for architects is because they support the idea that we are part of an enduring, progressive social construct that will not succumb to decay. Possibly the most controversial material utilised in building for more than a century is concrete; it

is a material at once natural and totally fabricated. It appears everywhere, from underground car parks to showcase high-rise. The contested place of concrete as a material, whose value and signification alter due to context, made it an interesting choice for the set, and an opposite choice to glass, opacity rather than transparency. The architect's job is to make the abstract concrete, make manifest ideas about materiality, spirituality, biology and social identity. The simple alchemy of concrete, this magical amalgamation that can be both the cheapest and most humble of materials or polished and buffed to adorn a successful architect's office. Concrete occupies a place in modern cultural and social experience, it is a primary material referred to in the play text around which cluster the failed missions of past idealism. Every country has its 'projects': concrete jungles and utopias turned dystopian reality. The school building of the play text is a low-cost prefabricated structure built in the seventies. In preserving it as the memorial perhaps the Architect is deliberately holding up a mirror to reflect a distorted version of a social ideal. The school building is supposed to be a product of social rehabilitation and emancipation but is in reality a suffocating firetrap, a failure of architecture and social planning. The Architect is both product and prisoner of architecture's big ideas and can be defined either as a part of 'the problem' of architecture or as someone who points at the problem.

By choosing concrete as the material for the set, we created a neat trope connecting ideas about the Enlightenment, about 'concrete' things opposed to abstract things, and the architect as the 'concretizer'; a modern-day alchemist. In its transformation from a liquid to a solid it paralleled the intended memorial's freezing of the site of the school killing. The set was envisaged as a concrete plinth, essentially a floor and a wall, with an aperture cut for a window. Even the worktable would be rendered in concrete, as an architectural gesture of excess. The space would be a forum, a place for argument and for judgment. The coldness of the material and the stern rigidity of its form, the window, now a recess with no glass, grave-like in its dimensions, together created the atmosphere of a mausoleum. The daughter's ghost would enter the space through this coffin-like aperture, drenched and very present, as if born out of a grave. Presiding over this space the Architect is both midwife and priest, being responsible for the birth of artistic ideas and for the memorialisation of the dead.

As a material and spatial correlate for a tomb, this setting was problematic in that it framed the architect within an arid and deathly sign system, potentially reinforcing anxieties about women located primarily in masculine fantasy.

The cathartic moment of the play is in the Architect's abandonment of her own big idea; by doing this she is released from a painstakingly erected self. Faced with her ruined model the Architect tries first to repair it then suddenly abandons it, revealing paradoxically, her attachment to the project and an equally compelling desire to let it go. Caught in this paradox she falls like a child into the Intern's arms, reversing the symbolic hierarchy with an image disturbing in its regression. The defining aspect of concrete is its quality of coldness, of hardness, its enduring aridity. The sensory reactions it might elicit from an audience are the same as being in a car park, an urban environment, or even a 'palace of culture' such as an art gallery, a cold objective space. This turning point for the Architect needed another setting, less damning and with a greater emphasis on revelation and transformation.



Figure 1: An early model of the set design for Anthony Weigh's *Like a Fishbone* rendered in concrete, Sydney Theatre Company, set design by Jacob Nash, 2010 (photograph by the Author)

The challenge was to create a space that poised the argument in a balance between two women. A similar task confronted Michael Arad in the design of an appropriate memorial for the catastrophic events of 9/11, our task was that of framing absence. The space was to be stripped back to the bare bones of the theatre architecture - a black generic rostra stage and a rear located black wall with a door, effectively not visible - to enable entrances, and a single small window. The Architect's office was to be dark except for the window, the single source of light. The space would represent an absence through the blackness of the theatre itself, serving as an abysmal figuration of death, loss and reparation.

A huge frame slung horizontally above the stage, an echo of the frame of absence that was Arad's design, where one looks up through a gigantic square frame made of

curtains of water. This frame, an exploded form of a window, had made its way into the pile of rejected concepts (literally it was retrieved from a bin) because, as an exploded window we couldn't figure out exactly how it could facilitate the pragmatic needs of the play's action. However, in returning to this object and by playing with it in the model box we found that by bringing the object to the vertical it resembled a large proscenium frame or picture frame. The idea of window and frame became conflated so that the practical gesture of opening the window to let air in can be connected to culturally based ideas regarding thresholds between the living and the dead; or to the perceptual frameworks by which objects and abstractions are organised into meaning structures. The dimensions also echoed the rectangular frame of the proposed memorial, the exposed classroom the site of absence, and a metaphor for the theatre stage framed by a proscenium arch.

This next iteration had sprung from a dialectical argument with the first. What would stand against the implacable rigidity of the concrete set? What would suggest ephemerality, transformation, flux? Against the 'judgemental' sensibility of the first how might this next iteration suggest possibility, speculation, rather than a taking of sides? How could we create a space for both the Architect and Mother to speak in order that the experiences of both are given credence? For the audience I suspected it would be harder to identify with the position of the Mother's fundamental Christianity with its subordination to biblical formulas. Her story of a visitation from her dead daughter invites scepticism. But the theatre in its convention of speaking figuratively might take her at her word; the theatre unlike the actual world does have ghosts. Later in this exegesis I will describe another instance of problem-solving the appearance of ghosts in a prior production. In the search for inspiration a work by video artist Bill Viola, *The Crossing*, became an important reference, dealing as it does with enactments of the most critical moment of change, a crossing over from life into death. Viola is able to connect with ideas of transformation, embedded in cultural language through a language embedded in the natural world. In this manner he allows a contemplation of the supernatural, the 'great mysteries' as a close observer of the actual world.

In *The Crossing* (1996) Bill Viola stages the crossing from life into death through a curtain of water. A plane of light catches the fragmented curtain of water and the

effect is one of shards of light emanating from the person who passes through. This deceptively simple work captures something of the work of theatre, in the way it enables audiences to vicariously experience something, in this case the experience of dying, without fatal consequence. The participants in Viola's piece appear cleansed by their imaginary crossing into the realm of death, as if this enactment freed them of fearing death. It was our ambition that our large frame would encourage a perception and reading of the work as an act of theatre along with an act of contemplation on the life values that sustain in the face of death. By reducing the scenic elements and presenting an incomplete setting the audience is asked to synthesise meaning as they peer into the dark of an almost empty frame, their perception of the meanings of the inter-relationships of objects and figures changing along with the action in the context of the stage landscape. In navigating the argument of the play, the scenic language sought to present the equivalent challenge of a hall of mirrors or a maze, a space in which to negotiate the various angles of the unfolding argument.

In contrast to the first set model, with its inherent gloom and its cold gravitas, this new setting, with its reference to light, allowed the play to end on a note of reparation. In the first iteration the appearance of the dead girl's ghost functioned as a grim reminder of the actuality of death and the restlessness of the dead. In the final iteration, her appearance is connected to a catharsis in the Architect, who rings to speak with her son on her mobile phone. A mood of reparation augmented by the glow of light emanates from the model of the memorial.



Figure 2: Marta Dusseldorp in Anthony Weigh’s *Like a Fishbone*, Sydney Theatre Company, set design by Jacob Nash, 2010 (photograph by Brett Boardman)

The frame was lined on its inner face with Perspex that could be lit, in the manner of a light box, with each side of the rectangle capable of being lit in isolation. The reduced environment of the set focussed special attention on the model village, on the play of light and dark and the repetition of the rectangular dimensions of the frame. The frame marks a boundary—the moral, social, and ideological framework that shapes the self and a view of the world. As a threshold it represents a boundary between the inside and an outside, where we are and where we are not. The staging invited a reading of the play that considered the differences in the social and cultural contexts of the two women, an argument of archetypes rather than a psychological battle of wills located in the ‘reality’ of an office. The scenography lent special weight to ideas about looking and seeing, about passing from one state or dimension into another and about confinement and liberty. The faces and hands of the actors etched against darkness would bring focus to the eloquence of gestures. A space like this would allow for a heightened expression from the actors, less a real room than a tragic arena.

The work of this piece of theatre that we sought to exemplify in the scenic writing was an attempt to reveal the machinery behind thought and action, in ‘laying bare ideological structures in our everyday way of seeing the world’ (Lehmann 2013, p.108). The characters are blind to the social processes that have shaped the other’s version of reality.



Figure 3: Teneale Clifford in Anthony Weigh’s *Like a Fishbone*, Sydney Theatre Company, set design by Jacob Nash, 2010 (photograph by Brett Boardman)

FRAME 2. BORDERING FRAMES

Primary to all subsequent decisions in commencing work on *Like a Fishbone*, or beginning the conceptual work on any production, is for me the consideration of the spatial relationship between audience and performer. This chapter addresses some of the factors that have led to the privileging of this relationship. While the staging of *Like a Fishbone* doesn't challenge conventional relations, it is important to acknowledge that the choice to stage it on a thrust, and the particular qualities of engagement implied by this form of staging, conditioned subsequent decisions in regard to strategies of framing the production. *Like a Fishbone* the written text has inscribed frames that define and limit, borders that separate by education, by class, by authority, frames that mark out privileged spaces, prohibited spaces, marginal spaces and contested spaces that, Genet-like, beg to be transgressed. The prospective audience for the Architect's 'production of meaning', the memorial, is kept at a distance and divided from the site of the massacre by a glass wall. The choice of a thrust stage enabled, in fact made inevitable, for the audience of *Like a Fishbone* the constant awareness of itself, of being part of a group. The implication of the play text's challenge is that we, the audience are being addressed as a society, a community; the play suggests that there is something wrong in the social fabric, requiring action. Mid 20th Century explorations in theatre had led to a desired escape from the 'straitjacket' of the proscenium, and from the convention-laden environs of theatre spaces, but paradoxically through this play with spatial relations, and the denunciation of the divided space, was generated a new appreciation of both possibilities of staging, one cool, distanced, detached and divided, the other proximal, involved and sensory, and with opportunities of physical interaction.

My early experiments with promenade, environmental and installation staging were strongly influenced by experiences gained in a training context, which were continued into a professional practice. The Red Shed Company³, formed in 1986 by graduates of the Flinders University Drama Centre, was committed to re-invigorating text-based theatre by addressing new forms of writing and in the search for innovations in theatre aesthetics. Although connected to the theatrical zeitgeist of the 1980's, many of the key considerations, discoveries and questions that arose from this period remain in

³ I was a member of the Red Shed Company from 1988 to 1998, the year the company closed.

contention and still inform practices today and are part of contemporary interrogations of theatre.

The rejection of the proscenium arch and the strictures of division between audience and performer extended to a broader rejection of conventional theatre spaces. Dorita Hannah explains the urge to move away from traditional theatre venues in her book *Event-Space* (2019, p.25):

Theatre architecture as event-space ... tends to be both regularizing (self-referential and recognizable) and regulating (codifying performance and reception). As a familiar spatial type, it resists ways of freeing itself from its regularity, from its limited and limiting containment.

This desire to be liberated from the containing aspect of theatre architecture and a reaction against the passivity of the audience constituted by the divisions of proscenium style staging led to the search for other means of interaction and other locations for staging these interactions. Concurrent with the Red Shed's experiments with the relocation of audience performer relations was the work of numerous non-mainstream theatre companies in Australia. Sydney Front, an avant-gardist performance collective, presented *The Pornography of Performance* in 1988, a playful interrogation into the economies of audience/performer desires; the audience were invited to put hands through apertures whereupon they were touching body parts, genitals, and eyeballs. This shock to the boundaries of theatre and the radical introduction of touch re-introduced a theatre poised on the knife's edge, where moment by moment the relationship with audience is re-negotiated.

With a different focus the Australian Performing Group, working largely out of La Mama Theatre and the Pram Factory between 1968 and 1981, had activated their audience through a diverse range of brash new play texts and theatre events, the common ground of which was political—socialist, anti-sexist, anti-racist—and which drew on the populist forms of circus and cabaret. Within this context and drawing on local influences, including a series of 'dance narratives' performed by Troupe Theatre in Adelaide, where audiences were led through a narrative, such as a re-telling of the Ned Kelly myth, by participating in a series of dances with the

performers, the Red Shed embarked on its own series of adventures in reconfiguring the audience performer relationship.

Key to this foundational period, (which included student experiences of working on large-scale site-specific projects with Julie Holledge as director and Mary Moore as scenographer, *The Burra Project* a site specific work in the old Burra Gaol, and *The Port Project* staged in the historic Port Adelaide woolsheds) was an investigation into non-theatre spaces and into spatial relations and the engagement of audiences. These approaches varied from one on one interaction, of peering voyeuristically into installations, to the communal experiences of the square dance. These formal experiments deliberately alienated audiences from the comfort of traditional theatre convention, and ranged from deliberate forms of cultural disruption, to a less defined disturbance of sensibilities and patterns of cognition on a more personal level.

Reflecting on a lifetime of work, Josef Svoboda, the great Czechoslovakian scenographer (Burian 1993, p.20), considers the possibility of doing away with a divided space:

Theatre space has been deprived of imaginative power, of an uninterrupted freeing of the spectator's fantasy. Should the border between stage and audience continue to be strictly maintained, or is it possible to do away with this division and situate the production within a single undivided space, in which—in extreme cases—there might be indiscriminate mixing of actors and spectators?

The case studies cited in this chapter sought to question the inherent values embedded in the conventional spectator relationship between audience and performer and, by so doing, to disrupt the conventions of theatre language. Special emphasis was placed on form to address the context of the transaction. These productions were enriched through imaginative relocations, and a rejection of the conventional model typified by proscenium arch staging. The experimenting with site-specific works, theatre-in-the-round and environmental staging aimed to reinvigorate the audience-actor relationship.

In *The Emancipated Spectator*, French philosopher Jacques Rancière (2009, p.5) addresses the ‘paradox of the spectator’, unpacking a number of suppositions regarding the passivity of the spectator:

Reformers of theatre have reformulated Plato’s opposition between *choros* and theatre as one between the truth of the theatre and the simulacrum of the spectacle. They have made theatre the place where the passive audience of spectators must be transformed into its opposite: the active body of a community enacting its living principle.

The proscenium arch, and its dividing function between audience and actors, was characterised as a function of an ideological separation of the individual from their community and represented an induction into a state of social and political passivity. The search for alternate spaces to the conventional theatres addressed an assumption that the ‘passivity’ of the spectator was an undesirable state of affairs and that this state was reinscribed through the regulatory capacity of the conventional theatre event. Rancière (2009, p.5) argues that there was a polarising response to the requirement for a ‘theatre without spectators’, in positions characterised by Brecht’s epic theatre and Artaud’s theatre of cruelty:

For one, the spectator must be allowed some distance; for the other, he must forego any distance. For one he must refine his gaze, while for the other, he must abdicate the very position of viewer. Modern attempts to reform theatre have constantly oscillated between these two poles of distanced investigation and vital participation, when not combining their principles and their effects.

Our use at Red Shed of promenade staging as an alternative to the dominant and socially elite theatre, attempted to decentre the ‘gaze’ with its economies of power. This form of staging broke down the fixed viewpoint, complicating notions of subject/object relations; no longer was it only a case of the watcher and the watched, as the audience could as easily look at each other as at the performers and could touch and be touched by the performers. This breaking of the boundaries and reduction of the distance established through conventional staging creates an interesting contradiction and complication of Peggy Phelan’s assertion (1992) that the

audience/performer relation in western culture is based on male desire. Julie Holledge as a feminist director and teacher counters, in her essay *The Language of a Lover*:

My fascination with mergence and the transgression of boundaries takes a practical form in the spatial relationship between the performer and audience. If the 'silent spectator' wishes to remain a 'dominant judge' the object in view must be perceived in its entirety within the single look. But as the object moves closer towards the silent spectator, it becomes a part-object and can no longer be contained within an objectifying frame.

Holledge portrays a theatrical space that resembles D.W.Winicott's 'potential space' characterising her role as a director as that of a child who can realise:

an infantile desire to orchestrate the movement and actions of the animate and inanimate objects that surround me. I am a poltergeist moving objects which are both separate from me and yet, in a sense, are part of me. It is all a question of boundaries (1994, p.224).

The inscription of boundaries is a critical element in contextualising and framing an event. *Like a Fishbone* was marked by the visual re-iteration of literal boundaries; the set was a series of objects and spaces defined by lines in the manner of a blueprint for a design. Traditional boundaries between performer and audience were maintained, a critical distance was both thematically apt and important to the audience's function as adjudicators. But the production also explored the divide between the abstract and the actual, the concrete and the ideal. The moment in the play where the blind Mother touches the model is key, with important potentialities (LAF, 14:40). The Architect is established as the protagonist, the space belongs to her as does the model (which is only accessible to the blind Mother through a description by the Architect). The blind Mother is initially the antagonist; she is uninvited and at odds with everything around her. The turning point is the moment she discovers the model of her own village through touch (LAF, 28:37).

The detailed white card model of the village, the site of the massacre is the counter to the abstraction, or lack of realness of the Architect's domain. It too is an abstraction

from the real until the blind Mother discovers it and ‘seeing’ it with her hands locates the school among the other village buildings and describes the events, the sounds, the feelings of that day. Through her agency the ‘actuality’ of the experience is felt; MOTHER: This is the place I stood in (LAF, 29:30). By enacting all the ‘divisions’ including the divided perspective of the audience, this shift is made possible, from distance to nearness, from the coolness of debate, of reasoning, of concepts, to an order of feeling and emotion perhaps stimulating in an audience an automatic empathy, one which moves without decision into the space of an(other). The audience’s imagination enjoins them to touch and to feel along with her in a re-enactment of the day of the killing.

Divided by sight and lack of sight, the model becomes a symbol of the divisions between the two women and of different ways of seeing, through sight and through touch. This notion of seeing through touch was important in terms of identifying a hierarchy of ‘sight’ in the production and is linked to an earlier work of mine, *Road*, which experimented with the audience’s sensory and participatory engagement with the performance, mingling with performers they could see, touch, and smell in the proximities and immersions of promenade staging. This privileging of sight over touch is materialised in the staging of *Like a Fishbone*, and enacts the power relation between the Architect and the blind Mother; in crushing the model in her hands the blind Mother attacks the Architect’s privilege.⁴ Both distance and proximity serve the discourses of the play, the negotiations between seeing and touching. An important feature of the Architect’s design for the memorial is a glass wall to keep its audience at a distance, in order that they might ‘see the truth’.

Road

In this promenade production (1989) the audience were included inside the boundary of the stage and the divisions between the characters’ homes were dissolved. The audience was invited, not to peer into their homes like watching zoo animals but to be immersed in the goings on down the ‘Road’ to feel included, implicated in the sense of social contract.

⁴ Later in applying makeup to attend her design presentation, the Architect slips with her mascara literally wounding her eyes.

Road, written by English playwright Jim Cartwright in 1989, had its first production at the Royal Court, London. It was written for a promenade style of performance; the audience could elect to watch from seated positions in the upper balconies of the Royal Court Theatre or from the stage that encompassed the area normally occupied by stalls seating. Our production was staged in full promenade in the Wetpak Theatre, part of a complex of historic buildings known as the Jam Factory. In *Road* the task was to service the reality of certain locations—bedroom, street, pub—and the specificity of a way of life in a specific historical moment. To this end we used broken bits and pieces of real furniture but loosened the connections of these real objects to their literal contexts. We needed to service the narrative requirements of the play script but also to accommodate the flow of scenes into each other and the flow of the actors and audience in the space. The staging for *Road* allowed the scenes to move fluidly from exterior to interior without resorting to set changes; this fluidity went beyond the pragmatics of flow to the conceptual bleeding of boundaries or the juxtaposition of opposites.

In promenade, location becomes a grammatical unit in a discursive landscape. If the stage merely recreates literal settings as described in the text, then the staging is in the service of the text, but the staging can create gaps, disjunctions and contradictions between the literal settings and what is seen, and then the audience begins to ‘read’ the staging, to engage in a decoding of the discursive practice of the production.

The audience moved in and around coal slag heaps and could sit on the furniture that was dispersed among them. Some sat on the edge of a broken bed alongside two young characters conducting a hunger strike to their deaths. The breakdown of divisions between audience and actor constituted an uncommon proximity and an increased sense of intimacy. Promenade staging unseated the audience, encouraging them to adopt multiple positions based on their will or desire to see. Some commented after the performance that the experience felt more like film than theatre; the multi-dimensionality of the interaction, perhaps resembled the effects of editing between long shot, medium shot and close-up in film. Our audience participated in an act of imaginative recreation, engaging in objective appraisal alongside an involvement through proximity. We were seeking new ways to increase a sense of engagement that we felt had been lost to theatre; we had not banished convention but rebelled against

its lack of vitality. The frame in this instance was not dismantled but rather tilted from the vertical to the horizontal. Freed from the totalising literality of naturalism, a multiplicity of significations could be stimulated in a metaphoric landscape that contained the minimal requirements of the actual.

Although the written text was the starting point in the majority of Red Shed Company productions, they were characterised by spatial restlessness, each production demanding a re-configuration of the space. In working on the stage designs for Daniel Keene's *Low* and *All Souls* I made use of the flexibility of the Red Shed space, a converted bakery with no fixed stage or seating that enabled a complete re-configuration for each production. This constant re-location of the audience became a part of the aesthetic identity of the company. The set design for *Low* was a pit made of sheets of rusting tin. The audience sat on four sides looking down into the set; the only objects in the space were a table setting and a low bed, constructed from industrial perforated steel designed to match the rusting metal of the set. The play describes the descent into crime of two young lovers who are on the bottom rung of the social ladder. The simple set represented a cage or a cell.

All Souls similarly located the audience on all four sides of the action and the set consisted of a large raked stage that entirely filled the space. The audience were seated above the action on a raised scaffold gallery on all sides looking down onto the action, high above the floor at one end and at the other with their feet resting on the highest point of the raked stage. The audience reached their seats on scaffold towers by ascending the raked stage. The action of the play required several locations, a lounge room with a television, a tattooist's parlour, a hospital and other exterior locations. Each location was designated by a single piece of furniture constructed to resemble lead, influenced by a sculpture, *The Women of the Revolution (Les Femmes de la Revolution)* (1992), created by German artist Anselm Kiefer. The terms of the audience's engagement were key to framing each production. In the case of *All Souls* the audience sat above the arena looking down into the pit; the action and the objects on the raked stage looked in danger of sliding down into the blackness. There existed a hierarchy between the high and the low, the living and the dead. The staging was not only about facilitating the action or providing a setting to the fictional reality; it was about building a machine that staged a relationship, actual and notional, between

audience and actor, audience and character, and between each person in that room at that time. In this way the audience could be made to feel variously like jury, fellow protester or spectators of a blood sport.

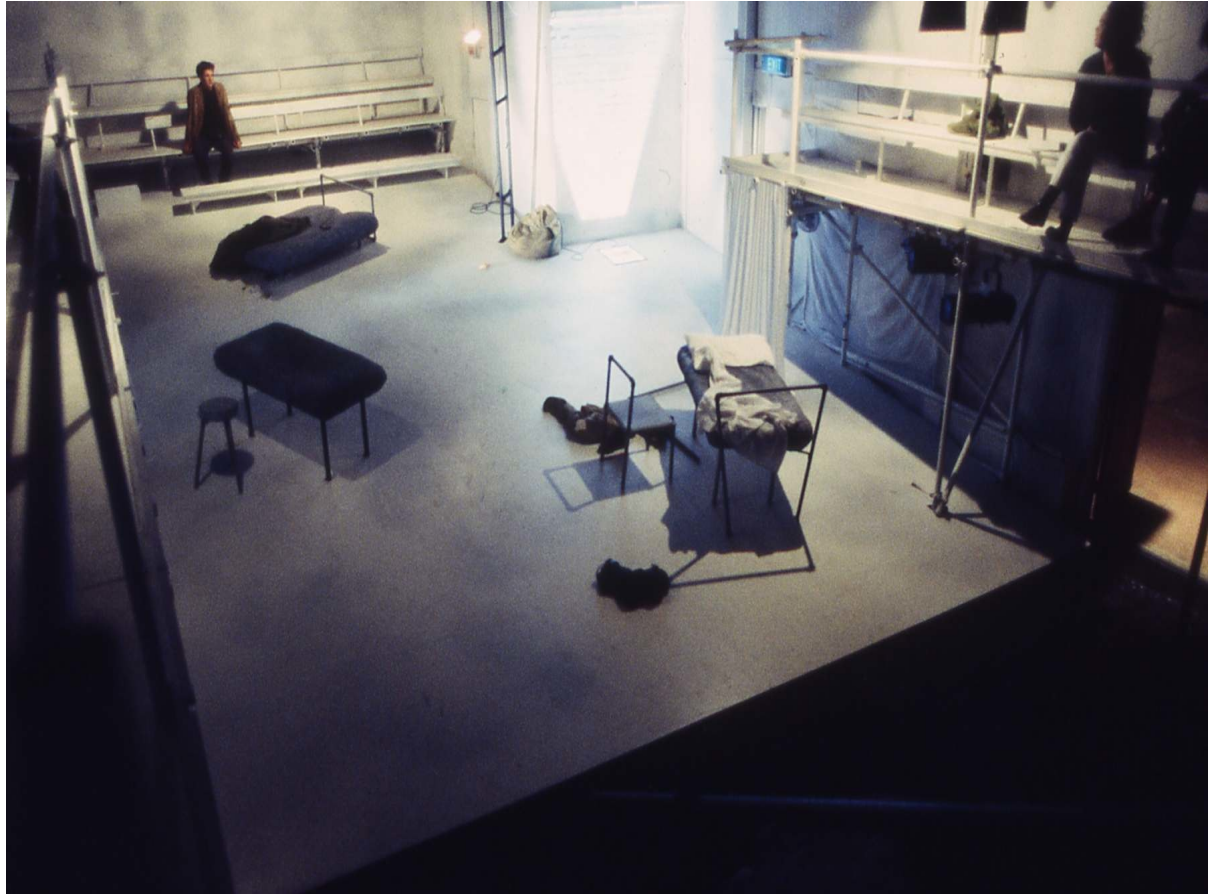


Figure 4: Daniel Keene's *All Souls*, Red Shed Theatre Company, scenography by Tim Maddock, 1993 (photograph by David Wilson)

Carthaginians (1990)⁵ by Frank McGuinness is set in a graveyard. The Red Shed space was filled with concrete, to create the appearance of a river in flood frozen in time. The waves of concrete rose in places to one and a half metres. The audience was located on raft-like stages of irregular shape and size to locate them within the action, to include them in the frame, to actualise through metaphor non-literal aspects of the text. The work of this period was an attempt to create experiences for our audience that transcended the comforts of 'a night at the theatre' and that embroiled and engaged people within a conflicted arena. This period of experiment with audience

⁵ *Carthaginians*, *Low* and *All Souls* were directed by Catherine McKinnon and designed by Tim Maddock

proximity and with the transgression of conventional boundaries spanned a decade but eventually led to a desire to readopt the conventions of distance and division as a viable and conscious strategy of staging. The idea of the passive spectator, who alienated, sits and is told, has more recently been challenged by Rancière (2009, p.15) who argues for an emancipation based not on the 're-appropriation of a relationship to self lost in a process of separation', but in undoing the calculation of uniform transmission between performer and spectator:

It is not the transmission of the artist's knowledge or inspiration to the spectator. It is the third thing that is owned by no one, but which subsists between them, excluding any uniform transmission, any identity of cause and effect.

This account of the re-configuration of the audience relation to the action in this period at the Red Shed is to illustrate the pathway that has led to an understanding that because we sit and watch does not mean that we are inactive. The function of direction and scenography may be to stimulate within the audience a conceptualisation of the major discourse/s of the play and to contextualise these discourses within a spatial dynamic and relationship, within an architecture of signification.

Being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation. We also learn and teach, act and know, as spectators who all the time link what we see to what we have seen and said, done and dreamed. (Rancière 2009, p.17)

The revoking of a necessity to activate the spectator through proximity reopens the possibilities of utilising distance and division deliberately to address the divided aspect of relations between people and objects and consequently, frees the space of the stage to function discursively. Hannah argues that:

The theatregoing public has always been conscious of itself, its expectations and the power it holds over the staged event. This inherent and essential awareness of its own performance within the meta-performance of the event

creates a necessary and creative tension between audience and performers that can be manipulated by the production but never controlled.
(2019, p.23)

Relinquishing the desire to control leads to another kind of calculation, through the positioning of audience, by re-drawing the borders between audience and performer they can be located within a self-reflexive frame of watching. No longer in a position of stable authority granted by objectivity, they are in a relational awareness. Boenisch (2015, p.114) refers to this kind of theatre practice as entailing a ‘spectatorial position—kept at its reflexive distance,’ which is ‘crucially, no longer the distance that allows us to own, know, command, direct and dictate the ‘object to watch’ and thereby unsettles the ‘voyeuristic gaze of appropriation and consumption.’

Each of the productions cited in this chapter involved a conscious acknowledgement of and interaction with the actual theatre space, its architecture, its specific qualities and its cultural resonances. The staged event plays between ‘realness’—the actual space and time of the theatre—and fiction and declares its illusory apparatuses, its nature as an act of theatre. The audience are located among the performers, close, or distant, at different occasions, and this interplay between distance and proximity is a relation that can be directed and is material in framing the potential meanings of the various interconnecting texts of performance. *Like a Fishbone* requires that the audience experience closeness and distance in equal measure. The Architect’s model of the frozen moment after the act of terror with its glass wall distancing its audience stands counterpointed to the ‘closeness’ or sense of physical empathy that is generated through touch, by the blind Mother’s ‘reading’ of the village and the intimacy embodied in the rendering of the sounds and sensations experienced through the events of that day.

FRAME 3. THE FRAME AS BLACK MIRROR

The concept of the theatre as a mirror to life is a familiar one. Historically it has moved from techniques of false perspectives, mirroring life through a trick of optics, to a stage which the audience look into, often through the frame of the proscenium arch as through a window, to see life reflected back in a mimesis, an imitation of life that seeks the audience's recognition. *Like a Fishbone*, as a work of realism, is bound by an expectation, that of seeing a slice of life. This expectation, of seeing oneself reflected in the 'mirror', opens opportunities to simultaneously engineer and distort affirmations of a 'reality'. The type of mirror intended by the chapter title is like a two-way mirror; lit from the front it is an opaque fully reflective surface but as the light from behind the mirror increases, images from behind the mirror become visible. In this metaphor the fully reflective surface represents a continuity with the world 'known' by the audience, and the world behind it is an immanent space, an other-space. Aronson states that:

'[w]e look at the stage and it returns our gaze. What better definition of a mirror? But an abyss also implies something with no bottom, something unknowable, something terrifying. To look into the stage is to look into a world of mystery, but also, I believe, into a world of terror' (2005, p.101).

The implications of Aronson's statement are profound, in that the spectator is obliged to regard in this black mirror—the stage—a reflection of otherness. Maybe the theatre is in a constant state of yearning for the other, a dance of opposites and inherent contradictions; the watcher desires to be seen; the word begs for silence; presence is the mask of absence; the real craves its simulation and illusion exposes itself as fake; the self sees itself as other to itself with the potential for cruelty and destruction as well as for creation, itself a terrifying responsibility.

In staging *Like a Fishbone* it was important to identify and locate the place and the nature of the Architect's transformation, a turning point that indicates a loss of certainty, to locate her crisis not in the abrogation of her role as mother but as a collapse, as in a house of cards, of an edifice of meaning, a mirroring in personal terms of the historically pivotal collapse of the World Trade Centre towers. The

inability to see the other is actualised in the Mother's blindness. The production's design is in effect a chamber of black mirrors; a refractive space in which what is reflected back is the unspoken question. The establishment of this refractive space is a question of the work of integration of the totality of parts, a totality perhaps better described as scenography.

Scenography describes a practice that entails more than the design of settings, costumes and lights. In Aronson's view, 'it carries a connotation of an all-encompassing visual-spatial construct as well as the process of change and transformation that is an inherent part of the physical vocabulary of the stage' (2005, p.7). The response to a space is always partly rational and intellectual but it is also intuitive and based in feeling and the sensation of actually being there. Italian theatre practitioner, Romeo Castellucci (Castellucci et al 2007, p. 203), describes his approach to making *Tragedia Endogonidia* (2001) by noting that:

In every instance there's a sort of animalistic response to the space as volume; it's not an architectonic space but a volume, a cavity, like the volume of a sculpture. I mean that facing any space you can have an animal, infantile reaction to its volume; it becomes very clear and evident how this volume can speak.

This intuitive response to space and place is a critical element of scenography, along with an appreciation of the denotative and connotative meanings that all buildings divulge due to their social use and their architectural provenance. Space communicates on many levels in a dialogue with an audience that reaches beyond the written text:

In fact, for most spectators, it is the apprehension of space that may be the most profound and powerful experience of live theatre although admittedly it is it is one that is most often felt subconsciously. (Aronson 2005, p.1)

In holding up a 'black mirror' the audience is invited into an engagement with a recognisable reality but fall headlong, like Alice, into another realm, with different rules, a place where the ghost of a dead child can appear. 'Problems' like the

appearance of the ghost provide creative points of departure; by introducing the figure of the child/ ghost the possibilities of the discursive realm are expanded. The ghost destabilises the reality of the present opening a portal into the past and future, her presence provokes the question “who are you, what were you and what have you become?” The ghost weakens faith in the certainties of reality and permits a bleeding into the present of the past, of memory, of lost time. This dangerous mirror, a mirror of instability and precariousness can be likened to a hall of mirrors where the sense of locatedness is an illusion. In *Like a Fishbone* the set floated in a sea of theatre blackness, the characters suspended on a tightrope over an abyss. The figure of the ghost in theatre opens the possibility of the irruption of the unreal, investing it with a powerful immanence, a connection to the numinous and a challenge to the known material world. In exploring the possibility of the frame of the dark mirror in *Like a Fishbone* I looked back to the decisions made in a previous production I had directed, *Terminus*, tapping into the abysmal potential of the theatre this production utilised the sensorial potential of space and its dimensions to manufacture a liminal architecture in which poetic world and ‘real world’ could spill into each other. We wanted to create a space where characters could appear and disappear without entrances and exits, where scenes could dissolve into each other without moving furniture (it too required the appearance of a ghost of a child). In this world the ‘dark mirror’ operated to create a vertiginous space with no perceptible limit. These productions had in common the characters’ search for a locus of meaning within an apparently chaotic universe and an abiding sense of loss and absence, an absence derived from Nietzsche’s provocation of a godless universe. The ground zero site of 9 /11, with its stark framing of absence and presence, is both the originating moment for *Like a Fishbone* and an apposite metaphor for the theatre as a dark mirror.

Terminus

In 1995 Daniel Keene was commissioned to write a new play and it was programmed for production at the Red Shed Theatre. Keene described the central character, John as ‘a man with no soul’. John is alone, riding the last train of the night; the only other passenger a boy with a box, in the box is a bird. John asks to see the bird, but the boy refuses him; John kills the boy and takes the box. A few scenes later, John encounters a woman on the street at night, Joanne is the boy’s sister and has just come from identifying the body of her brother at the morgue; John and Joanne become cold

lovers. During the night the bird tries to fly out the window, but the window is shut fast and the bird dies. John puts the dead bird into the street where a homeless man finds it. Two detectives, one young, one old, will later arrest this man for the murder of the boy and so John never pays for his crime; in the final scene, as he sits on the last train with Joanne on her way to her brother's graveside, he gives her a gift, a mechanical bird.

The problem in describing the theatre as a mirror to life is activated when representations of the audiences' lives are played back to them as a gesture of comfort and reassurance. The German artist Julian Rosefeldt creates work that spans the divide between art, cinema and theatre. In Part II of *Trilogy of Failure, The Stunned Man* (2004), Rosefeldt re-frames domestic reality, a man who repetitively destroys then repairs his apartment, in an absurd loop:

As viewers we are fully aware we are not being plunged into an illusionistic world, but at the same time the reality of each scene is not *right*, rather it is a sense of a reality perverted or distorted, one which is destabilized by performative action in order to highlight the paradoxical nature of everyday existence. (Rosefeldt & Berg 2008, p.36)

Rosefeldt creates a new 'everyman' whom we observe as we would an animal in the zoo. John, in *Terminus*, is also a version of everyman without the guidance of moral or law; he attempts to act out his life on impulse, and, like some dark predator, he smells out human weakness and destroys it. He mirrors the traumas, the gestures of his victims, their pain, mocking their sullied and disappointed lives.

At the time the play was innovative and challenging. This was before exposure to playwrights of the 'in-yer-face' era, a term coined by Alex Sierz to label the works of playwrights like Martin Crimp and Sarah Kane and the later works of Caryl Churchill, among others. *Terminus* broached a contemporary malaise. The play reflected the torpor and weariness brought about by postmodern moral relativity, it was a personal poem to the times in which it was written and cemented Keene's belief that the mission of modernism was still playing itself out:

KEENE: I mean, to tell you the truth, I'm not terribly sure what postmodernism is. I think that modernism lasted a lot longer than people think it did and what people describe as postmodernism, I think is just a continuation—I don't see any break, 'Oh this is now postmodern'. (D Keene 2016, personal communication, 4 March)



Figure 5: Ulli Birvé and Robert Morgan in Daniel Keene's *Terminus*, Red Shed Theatre Company, scenography by Mary Moore, 1996 (photograph by David Wilson)

Work on scenography commenced with Adelaide designer Mary Moore beginning always in response to the specificity of the Red Shed theatre space. Keene had created a landscape of dreamlike dimension where surreal and real events co-exist. The challenge lay in finding a vocabulary to talk about the unspoken landscapes that existed behind, beyond, beneath the plane of the 'real', to enable the audience to see through the mirror, to gaze into the dark spaces of the abyss.

Unlike *Like a Fishbone*, *Terminus* played out in multiple locations—the interior of a train, a morgue, a hotel lobby, a cheap hotel room, a church, a police station and a bar—how to bring these multiple locations under the rubric of a single setting, a metaphoric space, stimulating a constant chain of associations alongside the literalness of the realism? And how should we frame the interactions between audience and the performers, to locate the audience spatially in a way that made connections to the implied meaning structure of the text?



Figure 6: Daniel Keene's *Terminus*, Red Shed Theatre Company, scenography by Mary Moore, 1996 (photograph by David Wilson)

Moore's concept was to re-create the theatre as a tunnel, a dark vertiginous space. The tunnel would manifest the restless existential questioning, a burgeoning sense of peril, within a space that could be pitch dark and still in one moment and in the next wracked by the noise and light of a passing train. This dynamic shift between stillness and noise, light and dark extended into the sound and light design. The challenge of the set design task was in suggesting a train tunnel in a space fifteen metres by seven metres. The audience was located at the narrow end of the space, to utilise its length. Each set element was built with a false perspective to create the illusion of greater

depth. The lighting further enhanced the illusion, ensuring that the back wall of the space was never seen; our fifteen metres were sufficient to create an impression of infinite space.

Both train and tunnel were suggested with a minimal amount of set pieces. A bar where the chorus of hopeless drinkers sat was constructed with a Perspex top that up-lit their faces. Other interiors were also achieved with minimal means: the hotel room a small angled platform against a wall of the theatre, and the morgue a metallic gurney bed lit with fluorescent tubes.

A series of angled black scrims bisected the space. In one scene Joanne stares blankly into the empty blackness of the night; standing behind a scrim is John who appears out of the darkness his face only inches from hers, mirroring her physical attitude. The lighting design by Geoff Cobham utilised moving lights, far from the sophisticated units available today these lights were rented from a rock music lighting hire and in transitioning from one state to another they scrolled and panned over the surfaces of the theatre till they landed on and etched the actor's bodies from the darkness like figures in a painting by Caravaggio or Edward Hopper.

The visual arts provided a common reference to the creative team, resulting in visual shorthand. the purgatorial world of *Terminus* led us to Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* and *The Last Judgement*, and a gestural and compositional lexicon was drawn from these works of Bosch. Through the adoption of the physical gestus of the figures in the paintings with their evocations of ecstasy and abjection our production was infused with the aesthetic universe of the painter. As in the referencing of Viola's use of boundaries, water and light in *Like a Fishbone*, we had borrowed from the art world in an acknowledgement that our experiences of the world are made sensible through perceptions constructed by and through a history of representation.



Figure 7: Daniel Keene's *Terminus*, Red Shed Theatre Company, scenography by Mary Moore, 1996 (photograph by David Wilson)

Terminus with its short, episodic scenes, and its dislocations of narrative expectation, confounds the expected trajectory of the dramatic. The use of monologue and chorus bring back to the modern drama the power of an ancient theatre of ritual. Characters speak out their private thoughts as a chorus of loners. John stands facing them, their black mirror. He triggers in them the desire to speak, but it is not to him they speak, there is no 'him'. John is the negation of the 'human', only capable of destruction and simulation. Our aesthetic mission was to create a theatre language capable of talking poetically about faith, values, hope and despair; we were attempting in our working practice to make a tragic theatre in a contemporary context.

A contemporary theatre is always in dialogue with its past traditions. The figure of the ghost in *Like a Fishbone* and *Terminus*, is a reminder of the speculative power of theatre and its ability to manifest and materialise the performative nature of our daily acts, ghosted as they are by myriad acts past. Framing abysmal space opens doors to previously closed spaces, spaces of speculation that ask of an audience, contemplation, an investigation, and the work of assemblage. In the closing moments of *Like a Fishbone* the girl's ghost walks along the vertically poised frame, as if along

a tightrope; the stage is a playful space too, not only a space of dread (LAF, 105:23). The parallels between *Like a Fishbone* and *Terminus* are to be found in their efforts to look through the mirror, to make of theatre an apparatus that guides the audiences' experience of looking and shows them another perspective other than that of a pure reflection of everyday life.



Figure 8: Daniel Keene's *Terminus*, Red Shed Theatre Company, scenography by Mary Moore, 1996 (photograph by David Wilson)

Terminus had experimented with the frame as mirror in its use of scrims and in its fragmented spaces, its false perspectives, and its use of lighting to make characters appear, or to disappear. The frame of a window upstage functioned as a mirror, the boy's ghost appearing as an avenging angel reflecting back John's weakness precisely as he had mirrored the weaknesses and failings of other characters. The design had originally incorporated a scrim that would stretch between audience and the performance space, a black screen between them and the action. This device was

abandoned during technical rehearsals as we felt that it distanced the audience experience, and yet it helps illustrate the importance of the formal play with ways of looking that informed the final production. The sensation of being in the audience of *Terminus* was disorientating, with its jumps of location and its shards of broken light, while *Like a Fishbone* presented a single continuous location, with subtler shifts in the lighting design. Yet they both were characterised by an interrogation into the constructed self. Each character in *Like a Fishbone* acts as a potential mirror to the Architect, as an actor playing a part in her demolition. Her space is exposed in permanent reveal, her positions are scrutinised and challenged as she in turn has scrutinised the model village. The refractory aspect of the mirror in *Terminus* was characterised by its distortions of perspective and its orientations and disorientations of spatiality through lighting, whereas the refractory mirror of *Like a Fishbone* was affected through the use of scale, the contrast of an enormous frame and a scaled down model village. The act of representation is characterised as a kind of ‘play’ with a toy-sized model starkly contrasted to the large and very ‘real’ event of the massacre.

FRAME 4. FRAMES WITHIN FRAMES - the Page, the Screen and the Picture Frame

In this chapter I will explore the use of the frame within a frame, the interpolation of framing devices from one system of language into another in order to disrupt the coherence and continuities of the conventions of theatre and to explore the possibility of creating new dialogues and dialectics through the collision of forms.

The stage set is an apparatus performing several tasks. It can lend a weight of reality to a fiction but also contextualise the continually changing actions of the performers and generate an active dialogue between the concrete and the abstract. German director Heiner Goebbels, speaking at the Adelaide Festival (1998), described a theatre set as ‘a machine’, and throughout his production *Black on White*, in which the ‘actors’ were the members of the Ensemble Modern orchestra, he played with all the parts of the theatre machine. At one point a gigantic arch of industrial construction fell dramatically (post-dramatically) to the stage floor. In a eulogy to Austrian stage-designer Erich Wonder, Goebbels (2015, p.67) identifies the difference between design as décor that ‘supports the ideas of the authors, dramaturgs and directors by providing signs, by representing fictitious worlds and times, which cannot otherwise be found onstage’, and the work of Wonder, where a frictional dialogue is created between performers and space and objects:

[H]e puts something in the path of the actors [...] [H]e tries to build a space that offers them a different reality, a theatre-reality—a space, within which this represents a machinery that needs to be mastered [...] [I]t is always his spaces which prefigure much of the directorial work on a translated, sometimes abstract, but always structurally coherent level.

Czech scenographer Josef Svoboda proposed an active stage rather than a decorative one. He argued that ‘[s]cenography makes sense only when it becomes an instrument in the hands of the director, when it becomes a space for inspiration, a kind of technical and design plaything’ (Burian 1995, p.20). Part of this spirit of play is in the deliberate creation of friction within the frame of play by cutting across the grain of

convention by deliberately disrupting the assurances and coherences of a theatre safely ensconced in its own codes. This disruption does not always imply a deconstruction as it can extend and amplify the potential chain of associative meanings through collision and intersection, like two voices in a duet. This chapter examines the possibilities of extending the potential meaning of a production through layering into the frame of theatre frames from other art forms. I will discuss the use of this strategy in three productions and consider how these works and their use of this device have informed the way of thinking in the staging of *Like a Fishbone*.

The Pag(*Uncle*) *Vanya*

Howard Barker's (*Uncle*) *Vanya* rewrites Chekhov's original or, more accurately, hijacks it. Barker invests Vanya with the will to act on his impulse to possess Helena and to kill Serebryakov. His aim is to lift the curtain of Vanya's incapacitating melancholy despair. Vanya's actions incite a general rebellion and the characters begin to re-write themselves outside the author's text. In the second half of the play, Chekhov arrives to quell the rebellion; as his final act he humiliates Vanya before he dies onstage, triggering the miraculous appearance of the ocean in a twin act of destruction and renewal. In his notes to the play Barker (1993, p.293) indicates that: 'Vanya's quitting of the Chekhovian madhouse became a metaphor for the potential of art to point heroically, if blindly, to the open door.' In re-authoring Chekhov's play Barker disrupts the peace and quiet of dramatic expectation by interrogating the authority and the authorial intention behind the play text, the act of writing itself is arrested, the sacred page desecrated. Barker's theatre often invokes the destruction of structures of social and personal replication, his landscapes as scorched as a Giacometti sculpture, his characters' destruction rooted in the impulse to rewrite themselves outside the pages of the book of rules. Elizabeth Angel-Perez (2006, p.142) notes that Barker's heroes are drawn towards catastrophe as a necessary path of self-discovery and self-creation:

Barker's *Theatre of Catastrophe* is not concerned with the Aristotelian reversal that would take us from good to evil and eventually back to good, it is concerned with a reversal of the generic models: The Theatre of Catastrophe is primarily a theatre that looks like no other, a theatre that builds itself against all the theatre types that exist. The Theatre of Catastrophe therefore teaches

the ‘catastrophist’ spectator to renounce his expectations, to give up all ready-made hermeneutical tools, to repudiate his taste for categories and for ready-made morality so as to be able to live the ‘experience of art’, an experience that does not leave one intact.

The significance of this production was in its attempt to wrestle with the scenic language and the traditions of theatre, its ‘generic models’ including the centrality of the written text and the ‘godlike’ status of the writer. The characters exceed the writer’s imagination and begin the difficult task of writing themselves. In the final scene, Vanya puts out his hand, blindly and with an enormous effort of will, pushes against the wall; a hidden door gives way and he makes his exit, out of the written narrative, the measure of the courage of the gesture being that he has no idea what is out there. This poignant gesture illustrates Aronson’s belief that ‘every time a door opens on the stage, a cosmos of infinite possibility is momentarily made manifest; every time a door closes, certain possibilities are extinguished and we experience a form of death’ (2005, p.54).

Imogen Thomas designed for the Red Shed theatre. The space was a sealed cabinet, all white, and the walls were scenic painted with indecipherable writing, resembling text on paper from the pen of Chekhov. This writing only extended halfway down the walls, an interrupted act. At one end of the space were gigantic pencils, penetrating the white paper of the floor. This violent dialectic between paper and pen suggested both the implicit violence in the writing of characters possessed of a limited ability to act and the violence of the characters’ revolution. Barker writes: ‘We love Vanya, but it is a love born of contempt. It is Chekhov’s bad faith to induce in his audience an adoration of the broken will. In this he invites us to collude in our own despair’ (1993, p.292). It may not be possible to live outside the boundaries of a particular historical frame or a class, in an unscribed place, to escape the web of meaning, of signs, but Barker (1993, p.292) seems to imply that it is worth our attempt:

Chekhov’s apologists argue his contempt is concentrated on a class, but we know that in diminishing the lives of a class he bleeds the will of his entire audience, making them collaborators in a cult of futility and impotence. Can the individual not burst the barriers of class and repudiate decay?

The challenge of the production of *(Uncle) Vanya* was to realise in concrete terms the discursive and meta-theatrical aspects of Barker's play. By staging the play on the pages of a half-written manuscript, the constructed nature of the speaking subject is made apparent. The large 'pencils' that penetrate the cocoon-like box of the set change in meaning when the ocean appears; the box is now a limitless and constantly transforming space, the ocean washes away the old world of spiritual paralysis, it cleanses and renews. The pencils are now jetty piles, the jetty a path into the new landscape.



Figure 9: Howard Barker's *(Uncle) Vanya*, Brink Productions, scenography by Imogen Thomas, 1997 (photograph by David Wilson)

By removing a wall that divided the theatre from the bar and foyer the entire space of the theatre could be used as a stage, raked seating was constructed in what had previously been the bar; the audience looked into the space through an aperture where once there had been a wall. By reframing an alternative theatre space with a conventional stage/auditorium an ironic tension was seeded between the authority of convention and tradition and a speculation around alternatives. The installation of a proscenium style division characterised the key concerns of the play, the characters taking possession of the entire space, but still confined by it, there being no exits.



Figure 10: Victoria Hill and Syd Brisbane in Howard Barker's *(Uncle) Vanya*, Red Shed Theatre Company, scenography by Imogen Thomas, 1997 (photograph by David Wilson)

The audience located outside the theatre were peering into another world, a sealed world, like peering into the lives of nocturnal animals in the zoo. By using the entire space as the area of performance and locating the audience outside of the space, the traditional relation between audience and performance is disrupted at the same time as it is adopted; a common relationship becomes strange.

The beauty of the theatre stage is in its liminal nature, the characters in *(Uncle) Vanya* declare 'the ocean!' and with that the ocean appears, washing away Chekhov's narrative authority, rinsing the accumulated dust from a cultural masterpiece. The conscious play of divisions that is brought into action in framing the theatrical space of performance and the literal appearance of the page opens a discursive space that encourages the contemplation of authorial status and the mutability of relations of power, between author and character and between author and audience. The act of writing is revealed as determining life not merely describing it. The character of Serabryakov retires to the side of the stage after he is shot dead by Vanya, seated in

an armchair he pronounces solemn ‘truths’ about the Chekhovian universe, in the manner of a theatre critic or literary scholar. This side commentary creates a friction between the immediacy of experience that the characters now crave and the soul sapping sense of the already written, already known and already bound up in convention that the play conveys. The production played with the transgression of the writer’s intention and authority and suggested the de-limiting nature of the boundary of the page.

The Screen—*Because You Are Mine*

Because You Are Mine demonstrates the use of the screen and the projected image and its potentially disruptive presence, posing the space and time of the pro-filmic event within the time/space of a theatre event and thus creating a friction and a fragmentation of the real time of theatre, between a unified ‘now’ and a ‘then’. The projected images disturb a coherent time frame and dislocate the space of reading through an understood convention of theatre.

The play by Daniel Keene was written in response to the civil war that occurred around the break-up of the former Yugoslavia. In the play’s prologue a chorus of women who speak are ghosts, already dead; they refer to themselves as ‘the dead’, and recount the manner of their dying, there is to be no dramatic tension around who will survive. The power of the play was in its simple evocation of the material realities of the scene of war, the loss of services such as running water, the appearance of bodies in the street, which no one removes, and the disappearance of family members. It is a play about the experience of war and the people caught in its path trying to make sense of the things that are happening around them. The engineers of the war are never seen, and the political drivers never discussed.

Two large pivoting concrete squares defined internal or external spaces; on the floor were three large white rectangles which mapped architectural boundaries as well as acting as canvases, or screens upon which the fates of the characters left their marks. In one rectangle a soldier has raped a woman; later the soldier is killed, his blood staining the white floor. The violence represented in the staging of the play was framed self-consciously as representation—the atrocities framed in white rectangles on the horizontal of the floor or screened on the rectangles of the concrete walls. The

walls of The Space Theatre (Adelaide Festival Centre), a flexible black box theatre, were rendered in concrete, as if the events occurred in an underground car park.

The framing was intended to allow the audience its own connection to the material while acknowledging the inherent problematic in representations of war violence, the mediated nature of the space of war and of the consumption of war imagery through screen and photographic representation. As Bogart writes of art's relation to life, '[t]he creation of art is not an escape from it but a penetration into it' (Bogart 2001, p.87). The work was aimed at an audience whose relation to and understanding of the political situation in the Balkans was mostly framed by watching it on the news. The play was designed to transform the spectacle as seen on television, the drama being enacted on the world stage, by re-embodying the situation with the reality of the people who were lost in the war.

In the script a father looking for his lost son at the Red Cross is asked to look through photos of people who have been found dead but are as yet unidentified. In a later scene the stage directions describe a stage empty of characters in a return to the Red Cross office, which now lies empty and ransacked. In the language of realist theatre a scene showing an empty room is problematic, similar to the silence on radio, which is described as 'dead air'; an audience is accustomed to read the staging through the animation of the actions of the performers. In a film we accept shots without people in them as units of meaning, but generally in theatre practice it is the presence of people that activates the frame of the stage. The use of projections provided a language to describe the lost people and a lost time that has already happened before the real time of the theatre event. When we revisit the Red Cross office, the scene in the ransacked office with photos and files that burn in piles on the floor, is represented by a projected image, the camera discovers the devastated room. The imagery was shot to resemble documentary or news footage, which, when projected, created a disjunction in the real time of theatre, representing a time frame ahead of that of the play, a time when all the characters of the play had already died.

Aronson, (2011, p.87) writing about the use of projection in theatre, raises it as a problem of two opposing languages:

What I am suggesting is that such projections and images draw upon a fundamentally different vocabulary from that of the stage; it is not a scenographic vocabulary. Unless the intent is specifically to create a sense of dislocation and disjunction, or to draw upon the cultural signification of film and video in our media-saturated age, the placement of such technology and imagery on the stage is tantamount to carrying on a conversation in two languages.

These differences in the language of film and theatre were utilised to disrupt the real time of theatre by the use of the projected image and screens as an organizing principle or framing mechanism within the production. In *Because You Are Mine*, the use of these two languages served effectively to dislocate time and create an aesthetics of presence and absence which correlated with the writing, with characters that are among the dead recalling the past in vivid details of sense: touch and smell. This sensual acuity was underscored by the soundscape, which consisted of singular natural sounds and the effect was a mix of forensic observation and acute subjective recall. Accompanying the footage of the ransacked room, shot through a gently opening and closing door, a squeaking gate sound at once consistent and jarring; sound and visuals functioned in a non-illustrative manner as memory traces. The large concrete squares onstage which could be rotated to any angle on a central pivot point became screens onto which were projected the chorus of the dead, extreme close-ups of the women's eyes cross fading from one to the other as they recounted their memories, sharp and particular, of having lived once:

FATIMA: When I died, those white shells were the last thing I thought of. And I remembered the lake. There were other... things... but they were... so vague... and such a long way off. But I could almost smell the lake, and I could feel those shells, the way they crumbled in your hands if you weren't very careful. It was an odd, powdery feeling. (Keene 1994, p.5)

The evocation of loss by means of objectifying devices, cameras and projectors, paradoxically made the experiences described feel more actual, more present. The use of film had associations with evidence presented in an international court in the prosecution of alleged war criminals. The absence of the characters, who we are told are already dead, is inscribed by the impermanence of the projected image and the actual presence of the actors provoked a friction against the inevitability of their disappearance.

The instability of the projected image raises the question of ‘erasure’. A stage set, relatively speaking, is permanent and unchanging. Though one set may be replaced with another through mechanical means, we know that the first set has not evaporated into thin air. (Aronson 2005, p.93)

The interpolation of projected image into the frame of theatre disrupts the continuities of presence. The presence of the actors in the theatre persists after the actor’s screen image fades, the different vocabularies creating a dissonance in the differentiation between ‘real’ and ‘illusion’. The absence suggested by the screen projections frames the liveness of the actors and the stage action.

The use of projected image in theatre has long since been broadly incorporated into its ever-evolving repertoire of technique and strategy, and the body of theory addressing its uses has grown commensurately. Employing the projected image in the opening scene of *Like a Fishbone* would no longer qualify as a disruptor of the conventions of reading theatre. Perhaps it is of more interest to note how formerly disruptive elements have become part of an accepted scenographic language, which in turn is incorporated into the common vocabulary of mainstream theatre production.



Figure 11: Daniel Keene's *Because You Are Mine*, Red Shed Theatre Company, scenography by Mary Moore, 1994 (photograph by David Wilson)

Picture Frame—*Ursula*

*I love you baby and I always will
 Ever since I put your picture in a frame.
 (Picture in a Frame, Tom Waits)*

The production of *Ursula* evidences another use of a framing device drawn from another medium interposed within the frame of the theatre space. The signing function of theatre is disrupted and augmented by the tropes and figurations of the visual arts, enabling the discursive economies of both media to speak intertextually one to the other. *Ursula*, the play-text, originated from contemplation upon a painting, Barker wrote *Ursula* in response to a viewing of a sixteenth century altarpiece by Cranach the Elder, *The Massacre of the Virgin Martyrs*. Ursula, betrothed to a foreign prince, has a vision of Christ instructing her to maintain her virginity and to throw a portrait of the Prince into the river. By throwing the portrait into the river Ursula commits herself to Christ and a lifelong chastity, exchanging a union of flesh for a union of spirit. She decides to travel down the Rhine with a cohort of virgins to break off her engagement. Ursula's Mother Superior, having a fatal fascination with her, decides to lead the girls on their pilgrimage of repudiation, but on arriving in a

spectacular reversal becomes the lover of the Prince, who then takes Ursula and her cohort captive. The Mother Superior finally authorises their execution when Ursula refuses to comply with the Prince's wishes.

Five provocations, written by Barker, are listed on The Wrestling School's ⁶ website (TWS 2016) to accompany the play:

1. Virginity is the fear of hell [...] the hell of a vertiginous desire for another.
2. To choose virginity is to assert one's independence from the insistence of nature—virginity is the repudiation of determinism.
3. Virginity is a vision [...] of all that lies after ecstasy. It is a premonition of the banal.
4. Virginity is an attitude to reality which relegates pleasure to a low priority. Perhaps that is where it belongs?
5. If one can deny sex, might one also not deny death?

Barker (TWS 2016), has already framed *Ursula* within his own response to a painting and European history, his cool observation creating a referential effect like an echo chamber or a mirror tunnel:

Far from being a parody of a pagan barbarian, he is infinitely cold and beautiful, leaning on his unused sword and observing the massacre with the moral detachment of the SS Officer. He thus affirms those extraordinary continuities that shock and dignify European culture.

Barker's Prince admires Christ's stillness, 'never running' (Barker 2008, p.127), yet he swims across the river twice in a masculinist disregard for peril and is torn between the cool dignity of a Prince captured in a portrait and the heated passion of a lover caught in a vortex.

Ursula's crime is to wound the Prince's own 'portrait of himself', as her rejection damages his ability to love his own image. The Prince meditates on Christ's last hours

⁶ English writer Howard Barker, exploring the dynamic between performer, language and audience, formed the Wrestling School in 1988 to perform his works.

in his narcissistic attempt at self-definition. He does not know what he is and therefore is reliant on comparison. In sending forth his portrait to Ursula, he invites her regard of him and his anxiety rests on the fear of misrecognition; that her regard for his portrait may differ from his own self-regard. The play can be read as an examination of the gulf between proprioception and representation, or the gap between life as sensory experience and self-image.

Barker is always a puzzle and his work must be sufficiently decoded but ultimately presented intact as puzzle and not as solution. The problem is not in unearthing some buried meaning but in finding the contours of the work through a specific theatre language, a language proper to the 'art of theatre'. As Claudia Castellucci (2007, p.29) states:

One of the political tasks of theatre as I see it now is to get right to the bottom of its own specific language. Without fear either of incomprehension or the impossibility of communication [...] with a strategy for words and a strategy for images that is capable of organising a new reality.

This idea of a 'new reality' is key to Barker's work, in that he invents and does not imitate 'real life'. Barker ricochets between the literal and the metaphoric, the historical and the personal. In the *Wrestling School* UK production, directed by Barker in 1998, the virgins were wheeled onstage for their executions on hospital gurneys with their legs in birthing positions. Barker positions motherhood as the death of the subject, giving birth a symbolic form of death, implying a loss of the independence of the individual and a crossing into a new symbolic realm presided over by the sword or phallus.

The landscape for Barker's work must be theatrical rather than realist, and it must be minimal rather than cluttered. Angel-Perez asserts that '[s]pace is the most immediate and vital paradigm whose conventionality needs to be destroyed: most of Barker's plays take place in a post-cataclysmic universe' (2006, p.142). The bare theatre with its absence of comforting signs bears a resemblance to this cataclysmic universe.

Central to the rendering of the text in this production was the idea of ‘portrait’ and the ‘*droit de regard*’ (right of inspection/access) of the subject over the object, the picture frame as a holding pen, a kind of prison. The primary figures or objects in the text that prompted staging decisions were the river, a boat, a jetty, a framed picture, a sword and a bowl of fruit. The river has powerful cultural associations with the crossing from life to death and the journey of life. The river is both the separation between the Prince and Ursula and the means of bringing them together. It conveys a dark immanence, of death but also of the force of desire. The boat as volume or container can be linked, psychoanalytically, with the body of the mother and by association with the Mother Superior, and from a similar perspective, the sword as both phallus and crucifix is associatively linked with the prince. The sword is the representation of the Prince to himself as a man and as Prince, a man of power. Later in the play he relinquishes the sword to the Mother Superior, now his lover, intoxicated by his transgression in taking a lover of advanced age. The Mother Superior, in defence of her newly discovered erotic potential, puts the sword to good use and executes the virgins.

The appearance of the framed portrait of the Prince, sent to Ursula as part of the transaction leading to their marriage, provided an instance from which to extrapolate a design solution. Could the picture frame be a key to the scenographic problem? The play text owed its genesis to a meditation on a painting by Cranach and the portrait represented both the power and vulnerability of the Prince. The sending of a framed portrait negotiates the marriage transaction. Through the introduction of the picture frame into the time-based form of theatre, a discourse was animated around the captive image, the living human form reduced to the deathly stillness of a painting.

The resulting set was a large picture frame that floated above a stage floor painted in gloss black representing the water of the river and estuary yet also functioning as a black mirror; this blackness was the domain of the ‘blind girl’, (once the lover of the Prince, having fallen out of his favour, she became instantly blind, with powers of special sight and with the curse of the exiled.) The horizontal frame became a raked stage constructed from untreated pine plywood suiting the ascetic world of Ursula and the virgins. While representing the boat in the scenes travelling down river to the Prince, it served as a jetty and as a riverbank. In the early scenes of the play, the front

of the stage was set at an angle, making an incomplete and open frame. Later after Ursula has arrived the stage is changed by bringing the fore piece into a square with the sides, this simple enclosing gesture changing the value of the staging structure.

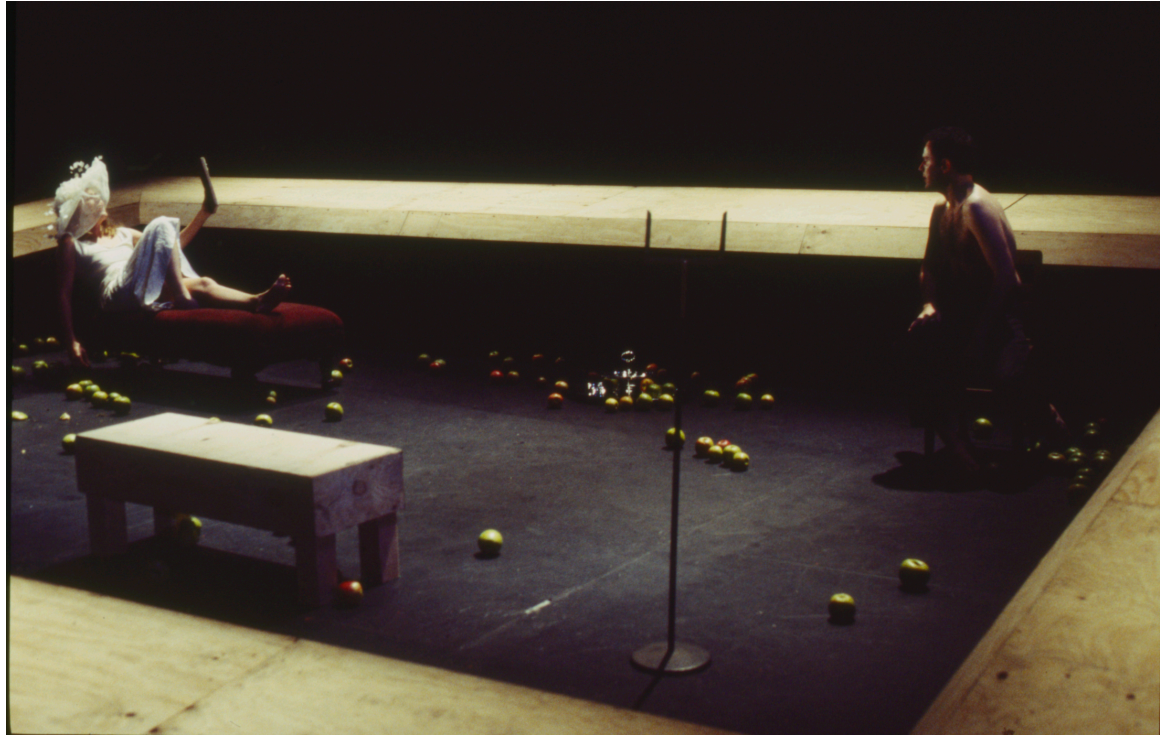


Figure 12: Sally Hildyard and William Allert in Howard Barker's *Ursula*, Brink Productions, design and direction by Tim Maddock, 2000 (photograph by David Wilson)

The closed form contained two pieces of furniture, a period divan and a low table, upon which a bowl of apples and a sword competed for space calculated to resemble the still life of painting. The still life (*la nature morte*), and its fascination with the inanimate, creates a dialectical tension between the body in movement, as a site of feeling and sensory awareness, and the static body as an object of regard and ownership, the artist captures the object in the act of painting, rendering it forever still or dead. The picture frame becomes a metaphor for a prison in the narrative and focuses the audiences' attention on the act of looking, various characters occupy the red divan as the captive object of the gaze, one of the girls who has gone mad lies on it trussed, gagged and blindfolded. The Prince is caught between wanting to be the

subject and the object of the gaze; he poses naked onstage inviting the audience to see him.

In this chapter I have described the use of framing devices taken from other forms, the page, the screen and the picture frame, in an attempt to disrupt an audience's reading practices, and to create new aesthetic terms of engagement with theatre. The ambition was to advance the possibilities of a theatre that considers the landscape of the stage space as a critical framing structure that conditions the discursive power and purpose of the production. In order to rethink theatre and theatre relations it might be necessary to adopt alienated positions, to view theatre from alternate perspectives, to impose upon it different conditions and conventions, to look at its conventions as strange inventions, to experiment with disrupting them.

These productions with their frames within frames have each informed *Like a Fishbone*. The rebellion against author(ity) in *(Uncle) Vanya* is explored through a visual desecration of paper, text, and The Word, while the blind Mother alters the connection between writing, reading and speaking as she re-writes the meaning of her village while reading it through her touch and thereby takes possession of it, re-drafting its history, authorship and its ownership. *Because You Are Mine* framed time and staged loss through screens and the ephemera of projection, the dialectic between absence and presence. *Like a Fishbone* used projections in its opening moments, drenching the stage in virtual rain before the lights come up to reveal the blind Mother, saturated, standing in a pool of real water. The picture frame, the frame of art of *Like a Fishbone* was poised in a precarious balance on the stage as if it might topple, thereby threatening formal certainties. As a static frame it resembles the Architect's memorial whose glass window frames a frozen moment, like a photograph, one version of 'the truth', but in the active space and time of theatre it suggests and asks for movement, the 'crossing' of Viola's curtain of water, the passing from one state to another. In re-addressing past productions, I am aware that I am describing a memory of the thoughts, the creative interactions and the decisions that formed them, but also that I am seeing them from outside, as objects that I can approach as a reader, a spectator, an observer. The strategies and devices engaged in these productions have not and do not accumulate in subsequent productions, but I cite them as a precedent to the creative research project and the attempts I have made

since in trying to articulate what particular fascinations have endured and consolidated throughout the years of my practice in theatre making.



Figure 13: Anita Hegh & Marta Dusseldorp in Anthony Weigh's *Like a Fishbone*, Sydney Theatre Company, set design by Jacob Nash, 2010 (photograph by Brett Boardman)

FRAME 5. FRAMING MEANING

The belief that the director, or any single contributor in a production can transmit a clear message to an audience conceived of as singular, or the belief in the existence of a universal truth, has been undermined. The role of the director includes bringing together in one place the multiple elements that combine to make a theatre event in a manner that presents the opportunity for a meaningful encounter with an audience. Contemporary theatre is often put to the task of ‘shaking the tree’ of meaning, intervening in and subverting received knowledge and practice, undermining the performative certainty of words and acts. However, these acts of dismantling or demolition are in themselves meaningful acts and open onto new vistas of meaning creation. This chapter looks at the framing of meaning, the creation of a playground of ideas not yet fixed, the curation of conflicted ideas, the collision of contradictions and the contextualising and focussing of discursive interactions.

The framing of meaning deals with the assemblage of plurality—of texts, of voices, of media and considers the signifying practices and the ideological positions of the audience, Jonathan Crary in his book *Techniques of the Observer*, distinguishes between the terms ‘spectator’ and ‘observer’, in seeking to avoid the connotation in the term ‘spectator’ with that of the ‘passive onlooker’ he prefers the term ‘observer’ meaning ‘to comply or conform’:

...as in observing rules, codes, regulations, and practices. Though obviously one who sees, an observer is more importantly one who sees within a prescribed set of possibilities, one who is embedded in a system of conventions and limitations. (1992, p.5)

Like a Fishbone addresses the perception of the artist/architect figure as a ‘visionary’ with the provocation that they are more likely conforming to a prescription. By acknowledging the problematic of a direct transmission of meaning, and of the limitations on ‘seeing’ from a single perspective, different models of exchange might be proposed. Boenisch in differentiating the practice of *Regie* from that of the director as textual interpreter places the role within a triangular exchange of ideas and energies:

Regie can then be grasped as the cultural force that sets in motion the complex and dynamic theatrical process where *semiotic* signs, text and language bind themselves to the forces of *kinesis*, of moving and ‘transporting’ information, and *aesthesis*—its address of experiencing spectators. (2015, p. 42)

Framing the space of meaning involves the creation of a stage space that informs the audience, through metaphor, association, literality or juxtaposition, how to ‘see’ the event before them. Framing meaning aims not to tell the audience directly but to contextualise and manifest objects and interactions in such a way that a fabric of meaning can be woven.

The case studies in this chapter mark an evolving aesthetic practice, shifting away from a primary concern with experimentation in spectator relations to a desire to create a new visual and spatial poetics for a text-based theatre. The work of the director and of the scenographer is partly a matter of the assemblage and distribution of concrete objects and materials in space, which refer either literally or in abstraction to ideas, and understandings (or lack of) in the audience that in turn open a field of potential connections, engagements, challenges, new understandings. This space of ‘meaning’ requires the leap of imagination across chains of association. The process is not a mimetic reproduction of reality but one which references reality through a deliberated artifice, requiring a process of selection and reduction; scenic writing functions like poetry. Koltai, writing about his design for *The Representative* by Rolf Hochhuth, a play that portrays Pope Pius the Twelfth in his negotiations with Adolf Hitler and his lack of intervention in the Holocaust, describes the nature of the design problem and the subsequent resolution:

The play contains scenes set in various locations from a beer cellar in Berlin to an antechamber in the Vatican and a final scene at Auschwitz. No crematoria, no gas chamber. Yet the essence of the play was exactly that and became my metaphor and eventual solution. All scenes were set within that obscene, anonymous concrete chamber. (Backemeyer 2003, p.63)

This is a shift in emphasis from a scenic world that is decorative to the use of space, colour and texture to create a frame that can privilege particular discourses in the text, an instrument that can order the discursive strands in the text and impose hierarchical relations. The scenography could frame the discourse of a production, with a sliding scale between the real, concrete and literal and the symbolic, abstract and metaphoric.

This chapter will refer to three productions, *The Ecstatic Bible*, *The Architect's Walk*, and *The Serpent's Teeth* to illustrate attempts in the development of techniques of framing meaning. These play texts are marked by their difference more than by similarity, and yet each production entailed the search for an aesthetic regime, a poetic space, with aspects of the real but whose ambition was to stimulate audience speculation within areas of meaning that have been inscribed by aesthetic deliberation. These productions staged in a mainstream context establish a conventional divided relationship with the audience. Each presents a challenge in how to treat the frame of the stage in order to focus the audience engagement to the play's discourses (with deliberated emphases through a hierarchy of the elements). Through reflecting on my body of work a pattern of techniques and intentions have become apparent in the development of aesthetic strategies to advance theatre writing alongside scenic writing. The design solution, an integral component of a larger scenographic conception, was often arrived at in a manner similar to that of Koltai, through a single setting, a solution driven partly by a scarcity of resources, yet there can be richness in poverty. These productions were text-based, involving complex layers of meaning, from writers working at the forefront of contemporary writing for theatre. In common they address a historical moment or event, a turning point around which they speculate acts of social, cultural and personal transformation. The staging of these plays required a mediation of meanings; they are not stand-ins for the opinions or ideas of any single individual, whether director or writer, but interpolations into contested arenas.

By describing the strategies applied to the framing of meaning particular to each of the three productions, I will attempt to demonstrate how these experiences correlate with and have informed, the creative approaches to *Like a Fishbone*.

The Ecstatic Bible

In talking about theatricality, we do not necessarily intend an escape from reality through fantasy and illusionism; in fact, the opposite can be the case. Theatricality and artifice can cause its audience to re-engage with reality. In *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre* Barker punctuates his aphorisms on the art of theatre with a refrain; 'All I describe is theatre even where theatre is not the subject.' (2005) But he is at pains not to be misunderstood:

In stating that all I describe is theatre even where theatre is not the subject am I asserting that theatre is/is like life? Emphatically not. (2005, p21)

The Ecstatic Bible was mounted in a world première for the Adelaide Festival in 2000 as a co-production between The Wrestling School and Brink Productions. *The Ecstatic Bible* is a history of civilization and an interrogation into origins that capsizes a boatload of received ideas. It is a vast epic play, sprawling across history, landscapes and generations. Barker describes our laws, morality, and civility as a product of a negotiation with fear. His characters reach their highest states of being through love or desire, but these states are circumscribed with a terrible fear of loss. Two central characters, Gollancz and the Priest, weave their way through the labyrinthine text, spanning across time and space, encountering dozens of characters, in as many locations. In its epic sweep it resembles in part the picaresque of *Peer Gynt* or *Don Quixote*, and in its perpetual deferral of desire it owes a debt to *1001 Arabian Nights*. It is a compilation of fragments, a collection of allegorical tales that describe desire mediated by morality. Gollancz is a woman who acquiesces to desire, in contrast the Priest repudiates desire, but he desires, nonetheless. These two characters appear bound in a contract stipulating that neither can die till the other does. In the final scenes of the play, they sit exhausted side by side, as they realise in horror that they are immortal.

If the Bible can be said to be addressing the painful, chaotic and disturbing effects of desire, then Barker's Bible addresses the same things without the familiar comforts. Barker's exhortation is to engage in both pain and beauty:

PRIEST: Mrs Gollancz...

I think desire is the most painful thing in the world.

GOLLANCZ: Yes. Why shouldn't it be, when it is also the most beautiful.

(Barker 2004, p.28)

Gollancz acquiesces to desire in the way that the earth accepts its seasons. Barker drew a cartoonish Gollancz standing blindfolded and naked, with a baby, also blindfolded, protruding between her legs (figure 18). The woman stands in a pool of her own blood, or perhaps just the ink that she was drawn with. The sketch brings to mind Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*:

POZZO: [O]ne day like any other day [...] one day we were born, one day we'll die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (Calmer) They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more. (Beckett 1956, p.89)

By calling his play a 'bible' Barker clearly intended something ambitious, no less than a manual of living, an alternate collection of allegories which taken together bring us closer to the meaning of life. The Bible is so large in our thoughts and practices, our philosophy and our morality that we cannot see its edges. The theatre of Barker is a church without god, a spiritual theatre with no system of belief. Of prayer, Barker has said in an interview with scholars David Ian Rabey and Karoline Gritzner:

It is without anger, it is uttered without hope into a wall of silence... the cosmological oblivion to which it is addressed does not, however, detract from its passionate need, its value as expression. (2006 p.34)

Barker addresses this need with his own version of the Bible, a response to the mysteries of being and of sexuality:

Why do I sometimes speak of the religious aspects of sexuality? I think because religion shares its ecstatic potential, but more, because religion is the study of secrets, and the secret retreats always before knowledge and takes up residence somewhere else. (2006 p.35)

Barker refuses to use the theatre as a medium for opinions or convictions or as entertainment, extolling the necessity of painful exposure. His plays do not represent a version of reality or everyday human behavior; they are a poetic landscape of pain and beauty where the only crimes are paralysis and moral suffocation. Barker steps out of a moral framework to speculate on human capacity in work that can be subtle, perverse and cruel, yet also extravagant and playful, making the latent manifest and bringing to the spoken word what otherwise might lay dormant.



Figure 14: Howard Barker's *The Ecstatic Bible*, Brink Productions & The Wrestling School (UK), scenography by Mary Moore, 2000 (photograph by David Wilson)

For this ambitious project, rehearsed separately on different continents, Mary Moore, a long-time collaborator, was engaged as scenographer. I would direct the Brink Productions actors in Australia while Barker directed the Wrestling School actors in the UK, bringing the parts together in ten days of rehearsal in Australia.

The production needed to accommodate a multitude of settings across thirty chapters, including a granite chapel, a wartime hospital ward, a palace, a stately house, a river, a trench, and a field with a cow. The venue, the Scott Theatre is a traditional proscenium arch style theatre with a raised stage, an orchestra pit and a fly tower.

Moore's solution needed to take into consideration the conventional nature of the venue, its limitations and its opportunities.

The language of the physical space would need to represent the large number and variety of locations while also inscribing the beginning and end of chapters, a cohesive playing space for the whole event yet one which announced itself as a series of parts. *The Ecstatic Bible* contains its own archaeology. Characters dig ferociously looking for lost objects, digging into layers of memory, in search of lost time, or just as an activity, a labour to fill the span of a life. The digging is everything, a devotion, a prayer, an insistence that we might not be alone, a repudiation of a terrible isolation in a godless universe. As the characters dig into the earth, they discover relics from their own past, evidence that they have merely gone in circles, and end up where they began. The play could be set on bare earth; the earth would represent 'the world' a historical constant.

Staging the production on real earth was an attractive idea to both companies, confirmed through pre-production conversations conducted via fax. But after pragmatic consideration, enthusiasm for this concept waned as numerous recent productions in Adelaide had been staged on real earth and experienced insurmountable problems with the effect of dust on the actors' voices. In this production some of the actors would be onstage for up to nine hours.

In conversation Moore has described her process as looking for certain clues in the text, events, and objects, locations that keep appearing, like threads in woven cloth. By identifying these clues—a process of naming fascinations and hierarchising discourses—a potential skeletal structure materialises, out of a seeming chaos and plethora of meanings:

There was an incredible weight on some things, and some scenes where you're looking out vast windows and apertures...It was only when I thought about how many times doors and windows seemed to work...take one element and see if that's the key. (2019)

In order to tell these interconnected stories, which re-enact history, Moore designed a traditional wooden planked stage, poised raft-like above a surround of earth. This parallel bible would re-describe human history with an invented ‘theatrical’ history.

A wooden planked, raked stage with a separate raised platform at the rear was backed by a planked wall made of a series of sliding panels, enabling us to create large openings at various intervals, or to close them to make a solid back wall. A moat between the main raked stage and the high rostra platform at the upstage created the opportunity to suggest a river, with a body floating past (on a stage truck.) Behind the sliding panels was a wall of flats textured to create a stony desert landscape. Barker directed the addition of a metal gutter that bisected the stage running from upstage to the downstage edge; in the course of the production the gutter ran with black blood upon the slitting of a throat or the birth of a child. When bodies bled the stage bled too, as if it had arteries, the rushes of blood paralleling the rush of writer’s ink. Barker’s intention was to create a link between body and word. The bleeding of borders between bodies and text evoked the miracles and transubstantiations of the bible, and the mystical power of the word.

The word. This word, which is only this word and not another [...] This certainty of the word, which enters its place uncontested, is the divine quality in speaking, is characteristic of the speech and never present in conversation. (Barker 2005, p.15)

The rough wooden stage in its crudeness and its cheated perspective, suggested a rupture with natural law, a god who was maybe an impresario, a theatre of antic clowning, where the characters move restlessly, searching, fleeing, chasing, prompted by desire like glove puppets, checked by a morality born of fear. The stage acted as a stand-in for the world, a world whose language is the language of theatre, the bodies and blood of the characters overwriting the Christian bible—in this new embodied history the wood of the stage stands in for flesh and bone. The earth beneath the stage has many possible cultural associations, including the provision of life and the assimilation of the dead.

Gollancz in a rare period of celibacy and self-denial has herself buried in the foundations of a church. Barker describes her flesh and the cool clays she is buried in as one element; her body has become the church and the church her body. The panel doors at the rear opened onto a vista of earth, as if the raked stage continued in the wall. This landscape of the elements had no sky and no horizon.

The simplicity of the simple square wooden stage, with the addition of some flying pieces, and the arrangement of apertures and hatches would be all we needed to serve the text, its action, its images and its narrative. The set transformations into a battlefield hospital, were made by flying pieces, in this instance a dozen or more iron bedheads in a row, the impression completed with actors lying in front of the bedheads covered in a blanket. This appropriation of real objects replete with an authentic history brought to mind Tadeusz Kantor's theatre. The frame of the theatre stage can reassign objects, causing a new kind of regard for them in the same way a gallery can a work of art. The nature of each location was suggested by the way the actors used the space, their attitude to the space and the objects they carried. Actors with large cane rods become fishermen, the gap between stages a river. Josef Svoboda suggests that:

The setting should evolve with the action, cooperate with it, be in harmony with it, and reinforce it, *as the action itself evolves*. Scenography is not a background nor even a container, but in itself a dramatic component that becomes integrated with every other expressive component or element of production and shares in the cumulative effect upon the viewer. It is, of course, an essentially imaginative, poetic process, one that demands an innate capacity for synthesis and metaphoric thinking. (Burian 1970, p.5)

The design for *The Ecstatic Bible*, permitted the achievement of many images and locations through relatively simple, and crude theatrical techniques, placing the text and its poetic complexities into a context within which audiences could invent and construct their own meanings around the clues given. As a director I felt I became a spectator too, constantly re-addressing the potential meanings.

The Ecstatic Bible, performed on the cusp of a new millennium captured the essence of the epic theatre, with its crude wood and earth textures, its basic technologies and its costumes rescued from history's rubbish bin. It referenced the passage of humanity through time and space in lockstep with the passage of theatre. The raked stage presented the stories to the audience, in a performance style predating psychological realism. In the spirit of epic theatre, or the epic poem, the production engaged in a distancing universalism, like watching a history of the world in fast motion, its players performing repetitive actions like so many puppets, consigned to act like machines, driven less by will than instinct. This engagement with the elemental and the universal reduced the 'noise' of specific and particular concerns of contemporary life and through this reduction directed an interrogation into large questions about what drives the human machine. Through meta-theatricality, we were able to draw attention to a doubling with the languages, economies, and enactments of real world, the fictionality of subjectivity, and the performativity of 'real life', in the provocation of new inventions of humanity.

In the exordium to the production, which functions as a prologue, the actors played anonymous refugees from some unnamed war. With their belongings in suitcases and bundles, they crossed en masse from stage left to stage right. From time to time the deafening sound of a modern fighter jet would split the air and the refugees cowered before continuing their flight. This image was cycled in constant repetition as the audience entered the theatre, establishing a space criss-crossed by multitudes in flight, an unbounded space that could change to represent wars, revolution and the collapse of emperors, reverting back to the actual present of the square wooden stage, the characters slumped exhausted onstage, immortal and condemned to a repeat performance. The production was defined by this dynamic shift from an endless succession of doors opening and closing in the restless progression of history, to a sense of stasis as if there was only the space of the stage. The invitation to the audience was to contemplate the crazy progression of the previous millennium, an invitation that extended to a contemplation of the future through the final image of a young boy crossing the stage carefully holding an illuminated glass egg.



Figure 15: A sketch by Howard Barker for *The Ecstatic Bible* poster, Brink Productions and Adelaide Festival, 2000

The Architect's Walk

The Architect's Walk was based on the prison diaries of Albert Speer, *Spandau: The Secret Diaries* (1976). I became aware of the diaries through reading a book by Gitta Sereny, *Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth* (1996). Speer had narrowly avoided execution after the war by admitting general culpability for his part in Hitler's 'final solution' while denying any particular role in it or specific knowledge of it. Incarcerated for twenty years in Spandau Gaol, Speer began an imaginary walk around the world. Walking circuits each day around the prison yard, he calculated the distance and plotted an imaginary global adventure, writing a secret diary on hidden scraps of paper.

The Architect's Walk was conceived as a work in which the written text was one element of equal weight alongside a number of texts, an element of the dramaturgy rather than its dominant form. The intention was to construct a new 'poetics' or aesthetic framework for a theatre of the spoken word in which the spoken word is not restricted to dialogue:

The absolute dominance of dialogue, that is, of interpersonal communication, reflects the fact that the drama consists only of the reproduction of

interpersonal relations, is only cognizant of what shines forth within this sphere. (Szondi 1983, p.195)

The aim was to fabricate a theatre work that was not a 'play' but instead an opera constructed out of multiple voices. The work of framing was already underway prior to the writing of the play text, in considering how to theatricalise the primary texts. The production combined diary excerpt, the poems of Paul Celan, direct address, narration, interpersonal dialogue and song. In the decision to engage multiple voices we wanted to avoid making Speer's 'battle with truth' the central focus, preferring to encourage an observation of his fabrication of a fantasy world as one of numerous narratives. While wanting to make a piece of theatre that employed contemporary means, there was also a desire to restore to the theatre the power of its pre-modern forms. Celan seemed to want to rescue words from their dark and criminal misuse. In a speech in Bremen after the war he said:

Reachable, near and not lost, there remained in the midst of the losses this one thing: language. It, the language, remained, not lost, yes in spite of everything. But it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through frightful muting, pass through the thousand darknesses of deathbringing speech. (Felstiner 2001, p.395)

In common with *Like a Fishbone* the production pivoted around ideas of remodelling or re-imaging the world, playing with the language of invention germane to theatre and to architecture and with the possibility of reparation in the aftermath of catastrophic events. The production referenced German artist Anselm Kiefer whose work critiques a nationalism born of cultural mythology. Boris Groys, writing about artist Rebecca Horn's installation *Concert for Buchenwald*, a 'vast archive of ashes' in glass exhibition cases, comments perhaps rather bleakly about the possibility of reparation,

The aim of this archive is not to help us repair a historical rupture and bridge the gulf that separates us from those who have perished; quite the opposite, its purpose is to manifest the impossibility of establishing such a link between us and the burnt past. Compacted to stone, the ash that has been collected and

exhibited here is an important impediment to any labour of remembrance.
(1999, p.36)

The problematic of this ‘labour of remembrance’ and the difficulty of representing the lost, would return as the central thematic in *Like a Fishbone*.

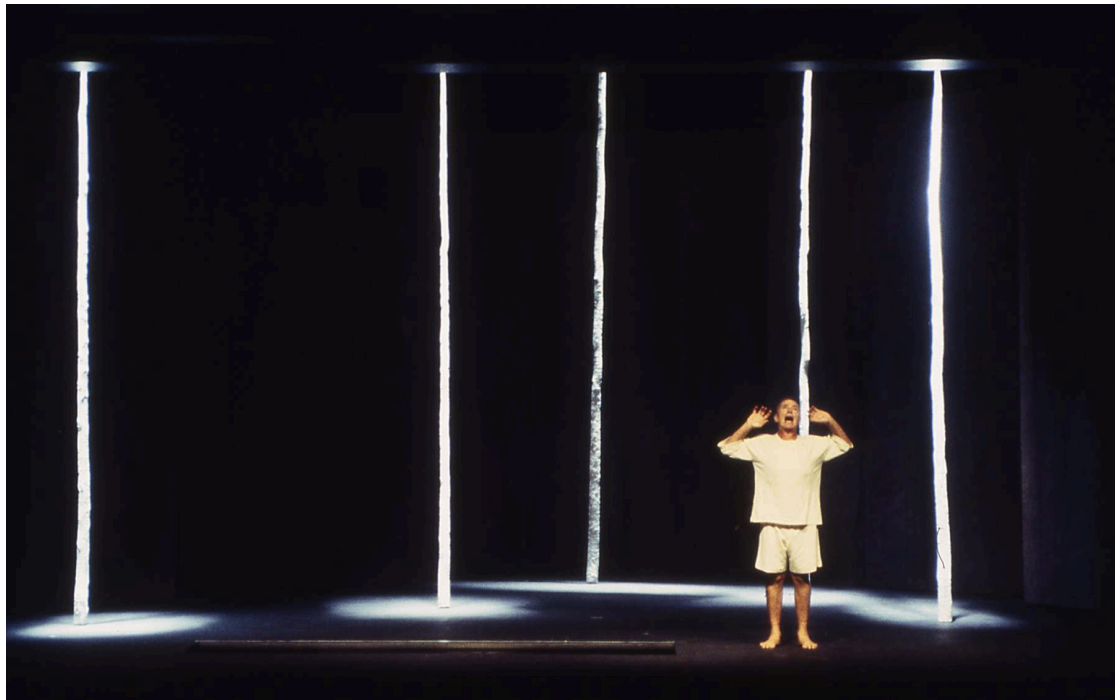


Figure 16: Ralph Cotterill in Daniel Keene’s, *The Architect’s Walk* Red Shed Theatre Company, Adelaide Festival 1998, scenography by Imogen Thomas (photograph by David Wilson).

The work sought through poetic means to reflect on the great void left by that historical moment, the Holocaust, and on the cultural myths that underpin nationalism, racial supremacy and the fear of otherness. Speer’s story was a vehicle used to enable a contemplation through representation of this historical moment. The language of the text and the language of the stage sought a distillation through simple and concrete expression. In an interview conducted with Keene on 4 March 2016, he talks about the desire to strip back to bare essentials:

DK: What I see in my head, when I write, is I don’t see reality; I see a stage... And then when I’m writing a play I’m imagining the bare minimum, like the absolute minimum... as I’ve got older I write fewer and fewer and fewer stage

directions, because I want that to be open to interpretation... you don't have to make it explicit, it should be implicit. I'm always trying to strip away anything that's not completely necessary... (D Keene 2016, personal communication, 4 March)

The process of stripping back brings weight onto those words and objects that remain; nothing appears that is not connected to the web of meaning. For Keene the notion of 'place' is a critical and necessary prerequisite for writing, but it is not a reality that he imagines, but a doubling of that reality. Keene emphasises the doubling action of theatre and the splitting of the real and the fictional:

DK: There's a kind of doubling going on all the time. I mean as soon as an actor walks on stage they're both that character and not that character; it's still an actor... the actor, him or herself, is already metaphoric. He or she is already representing something else, and the stage – I mean you could strip the stage of all metaphor, by completely emptying the stage, and it is just a wooden platform with a brick wall up the back and light switches... but I still think it's metaphoric. I don't think you can escape that.

The prison was represented by three high stone walls, the qualities of which were linked to the walls of the Reich Chancellery, whose monumental design diminished the human form. Window recesses high up and thin white trees which strain upwards created the sense of a craving for light. The playing space belittles the players, this shrunken empire, in which Speer enacts a dream of world domination; his 'walk' which might have been a pilgrimage of reparation is seen for what it is, circuits of the prison yard by a diminished man who once trod the world stage. This stage is now shrunken to the confines of the theatre stage, and it is this scaling down of the 'real-world' this contraction as a contrapuntal response to the will to expansion that characterises the production's thematic. All the characters, including the chorus, a narrator in a white suit and a diva in a red dress, are trapped in the same enclosure. They are like cultural artefacts thrown together in a box rather than living breathing humans, relics of a damaged civilisation. The stone walls created a sense of historical timelessness and a mythical past; this enclosure, denied of air and light obliges Speer

to reproduce himself each day through recollection, to evidence himself through the writing and reading of texts.

The work represented an incomplete attempt to move away from the conventions of dramatic representation. In a *Real Time* magazine review Anne Thompson describes the production as ‘beautifully etched as a visual event’ but comments that ‘the point wanders away from me even as I watch. I have to catch up with it later.’ In experimenting with fragmenting narrative-based drama there was a price in terms of audience engagement. Keith Gallasch, editor of *Real Time* similarly observed:

This is not a theatre of identification (if it is, it’s a testing of the limits) and it’s what makes *The Architect’s Walk* an emotional and intellectual challenge, not in the moment of its playing (which is powerful here and there), but on reflection. This is not a nice humanist night out, and although it offers no answers, it raises all the right questions, the ones that stay with you and haunt you.



Figure 17: Mark Gaweda, Ralph Cotterill and Alison Farr in Daniel Keene’s, *The Architect’s Walk* Red Shed Theatre Company, Adelaide Festival 1998, scenography by Imogen Thomas (photograph by David Wilson).

Undoubtedly the production achieved some of its aims, but in a similar manner to the first iteration of the design for *Like a Fishbone*— the concrete tomb—it distilled and focussed a multiplicity into a singularity. The prison, taken from the literal world, is a Prospero’s cell, a monastic place or a mausoleum, a sealed space in which the disparate elements are forced to co-exist. The box of the prison froze time, making a space of exile and reflection. The production intended to investigate the effect on human experience of cultural ideas embedded in language and mythology. If I were to revisit this work that space might be portrayed differently as one constantly punctuated and regulated, by a restless pacing, by mechanisms that monitor time, by a frantic consumption and production of words, of travelogues and diary entries. A space crammed with the bits and pieces of multiple texts and narratives, drawing on the detail of the Nuremberg trials with tables and microphones and reams of files and archives, more a conceptual space than literal.

This chapter attempts to describe the effort to create a contemporary context for text-based theatre, to extrapolate from the representation of location towards the creation of conceptual spaces. In creating these spaces with varying degrees of abstraction from the real an attempt has been made to draw on the spatial and aesthetic qualities of the theatre’s architecture. The simple power of the unadorned theatre, the audience peer into the darkness of the stage, a person walks onstage, and a multitude of questions arise and stimulate the projection and fabrication of meanings. In the next production I tried to use this simple power in representing a group of people, clustered together in a quotidian reality, in order to engage in a space of meaning that talked about power, territorial rights and the impact of these on people’s lives.

The Serpent’s Teeth

The Serpent’s Teeth is a play written in two parts, *Citizens* and *Soldiers*. Both address the theatre of war in the Middle East. *Citizens* is set outside the wall built to exclude Palestinian access to lands acquired through settlement by the state of Israel in the West Bank while *Soldiers* is set in an air force plane hangar in an unnamed Australian city. Family members congregate to attend military honours for the returning dead soldiers killed in the conflict in Afghanistan.



Figure 18: Josh Denyer and Pamela Rabe in Daniel Keene's *The Serpent's Teeth*, Sydney Theatre Company, set design by Robert Cousins, 2008 (photograph by Brett Boardman)

The structure of the play intends that the two parts speak to each other. I was contracted to direct *Soldiers* and Pamela Rabe, a distinguished stage and film actor was appointed to direct *Citizens*. Sydney-based designer, Robert Cousins would design the sets.

The Drama Theatre in the Sydney Opera House is a large capacity theatre with a proscenium opening that is relatively low and wide, having been designed originally to be a cinema. In *Citizens*, the wall was a key figure in the drama of exclusion and division, but 'the wall' was in danger of becoming a worn figure, having appeared in several recent productions on the Australian stage, and a discussion ensued over

shifting the context, to an Australian dividing wall (not implausible given the vaunted importance of 'border protection' in the current Australian political climate) and a shared language for the production was agreed. The defining aesthetic logic was Australian yet it referenced events in the Middle East. The wall of Besser bricks, familiar as a local, cheap construction material, would be the centrepiece of *Citizens*, erected hastily (the wall had to be remade several times in the workshop before it looked as if it had been built with no concern for aesthetics). By using locally familiar materials in the fabrication of the wall we were attempting to provoke the idea that conflicts on an international stage are intimately connected to Australia and not a distant and foreign problem.

The wall would deny to the actors any depth of space to perform in; the actors traversed the space in front of the proscenium denied access to the main body of the stage. The theatre space was hidden and blocked. A sense of ominous danger was created as the audience could not know or see what or who was behind the wall or their intentions, only the sounds and lights of a surveillance helicopter. The set was a denial of access to the theatre. The characters are dislocated from familiar spaces, spatial alienation becoming the common discursive language of the production in a spatial dialogue between the two parts. For the production of *Soldiers*, the wall would fly out during the interval leaving the entire space of the Drama Theatre open as a vast landscape, a vacuity. The theatre space and access to it would be the defining grammar of the production.

The aircraft hangar's structure would be suggested by revealing the architectural features of the theatre. By reducing the space to its actual textures and minimising the effort to 'fictionalise' the space, we hoped to de-centre the audience's expectation. By having them walk into a space emptied of 'design', we hoped to alter the expectation from one of entertainment to an engagement in a kind of 'work'. Through a realism in the performance and costuming, the audience should feel as if the characters could have walked in off the street.

The construction of two large sliding doors at the rear of the theatre created a frame within the frame of the proscenium marking the division between the inside and outside. The doors rose up into the lighting grid of the Drama Theatre creating an

illusion that the space was much higher, creating a vastness, a void. The vacuity of the theatre space performed an absence. While *Citizens* was marked by a hurried urgency as characters traversed the forestage as they tried to make various destinations by curfew, *Soldiers* by contrast embodied a slack and hopeless sense of time and of space like a vast waiting room. A cargo trolley, transport for the dead, was the only object in the space. In *Soldiers* the actors had nothing *but* space and this spatial differentiation dictated the tempo of each play.



Figure 19: Brandon Burke, Steve Le Marquand and John Gaden in Daniel Keene's *The Serpent's Teeth*, Sydney Theatre Company, set design by Robert Cousins, 2008 (photograph by Brett Boardman)

The characters enter the hangar to escape from the military rituals. The hangar declared itself as a double for the theatre. By formalising the movement of the actors, the piece became a 'dance' of the everyday, the actors at one point in the performance spiralling inwards to stand together on the cargo trolley, as if on a raft.

The production aimed to re-frame the lives of ordinary people, to tell the story of the ripple effect of the damages of war. Keene addresses the powerless and the effects on

them of those with power; in doing so he lends integrity and weight to those who lack representation through our social and cultural institutions. It felt strange but appropriate to be serving up this dark meditation in a ‘palace of culture’ like the Opera House; the margins had come to occupy the ‘centre.’



Figure 20: Daniel Keene's *The Serpent's Teeth*, Sydney Theatre Company, set design by Robert Cousins, 2008 (photograph by Brett Boardman)

In this chapter I have argued that the frame of the space of theatre in its specific and generic sense are critical in staging meaning, and that although meaning is a construct in the mind and body of the audience the director plays a part in the coherence of the interplay of meaning that leaps between object, body, word, sound, light and space. The theatre space itself speaks loudly as do all its parts. In an experimentation with framing strategies, the actual theatre, its architecture and the relational language of the event are critical considerations.

The codes and conventions of theatre tradition and the machinery of theatre have become a crucial part of contemporary theatre practice. The self-awareness of theatre,

an open declaration of its operative parts plays an important role in its reception. Through a constant reminder of its doubling nature, the reveal of its illusory nature, the exposing of the contours of the frame, the constructed-ness of representation is laid bare. The sleight of hand of theatre, once masked by misdirection, is revealed and theatre paradoxically gains a new potency by the exposure of its trick.

The three case studies cited above consider the framing of meaning through a conventionally located audience, where the audience is divided from the performers who occupy a stage. Yet the contract and quality of engagement with the audience is always a consideration in the framing of a space of meaning.

The Ecstatic Bible references life as mediated by text: 'In the beginning was the word'. Barker plays with the substantiation of the word as flesh and the generation of human experience through language. The staging of *The Ecstatic Bible* consolidates visually, through the frame of Epic Theatre, this containment and mediation of human experience through language systems, not so much naturally occurring as produced out of and productive of ideology. In approaching *Like a Fishbone* similar questions had to be posed regarding the origins of systems of belief. It wasn't enough to locate the apparently realist text in a 'natural' habitat, a reproduction of the interior of an architect's office, if the production was to explore contested ways of seeing and thereby making world.

In *Like a Fishbone* the use of frames within frames intended to indicate multiple points of view, ways of seeing and representing the world. In this framework of contesting positions, the theatre event becomes rhetorical and the truth makes way for adversarial argument; the figuration of mother and child becomes a trope in a war of words and ideologies. *The Ecstatic Bible* distanced the audience through allegory and the machinery of Epic Theatre, but in *Like a Fishbone* the action takes place in a contemporary space and time. The effects of alienation were attempted through a reduction of real-world objects, the articulation of the internal architecture reduced to a series of outlines. The intention was to draw the audience attention away from details that might align their perceptions according to systemic prejudices. By staging the action of the play around a model the audience is encouraged to see the production as a speculation about the models and blueprints from which life's choices are made.

In staging the argument, the solidity of each character's position is eroded, and this erosion of certainty is a potential opening of alternative positions, exemplified by the appearance in the space of the dead girl's ghost, who in the final moment enters the space and observes the Architect quizzically, the dead observing the living. Her frame is the double of the proscenium arch and she walks playfully along its length as if on a tightrope.

The thrust stage of *Like a Fishbone* was part of an attempt to implicate the audience in the fabrication of meaning. Given the opportunity to stage the production again I could imagine locating the audience within a less conventional staging, in amongst a much larger model of the village or separated and divided from the action by a large wall of glass. A re-consideration of the potential theatrical power in the interplay of proximity. One idea placing the audience in the thick of the action, the other at a remove.

The Architect's Walk staged in the literal space of Spandau Gaol presented a similar problem to the literality of the Architect's office. In each production a decision had to be made regarding the extent to which the design would support the fiction through realistic representation. The realised designs supported the fiction yet underwent a process of abstraction. *The Architect's Walk's* prison walls of stone described a landscape frozen in time and besieged by images, memories and actions of the past: a museum that can only be escaped through an act of imagination. Yet Speer's 'walk around the world' was bounded by the texts he read describing each locale he 'walked' through, his walk describes the limits of his ability to escape from the web of 'texts' that made him. There are parallels between the architects of the two plays; both declare their attraction to the truth; both have a responsibility in building world. In *Like a Fishbone* the first iteration of the design, with its concrete surfaces, sought to exploit the paradoxical associations between the cool detachment of modern architecture, and the design for the memorial, the preservation of a cheap concrete transportable schoolroom, its window like a grave delivering forth the ghost of the dead girl. However, this concrete setting, with its inherent critique of architecture framed the discourse with an abiding rigidity that precluded the suggestion of escape through self-awareness. The frame of the window with its suggestions of light and air

allowed the imagination to move through boundaries, to speculate around designs not yet built.

The Serpent's Teeth exemplified the fundamental importance of landscape or place, not just a location for a story to play itself out but a space around which and through which meanings cluster and transfer. The characters functioned as a chorus; the audience only knew them fleetingly like strangers met in a lift. A communion of sorts was achieved spatially. The relation of stage to auditorium was that of a conventional proscenium arch theatre, however the framing of the production attempted to create an aesthetic contiguity with the audience, with the intention of reducing the distance between the actions related onstage and the materiality of everyday life.

For *Like a Fishbone* we researched the 'ground zero' site, the problem its designers faced in framing an absence provided us with a solution. Instead of filling our set with the stuff that architects have in their studios, we reduced the office to a literal frame, within which the model of the village framed the school, which framed the classroom, which in turn was framed by a glass wall in the act of preservation of the site as memorial, which contains nothing but the signs of a disturbance, an over turned chair, an abandoned shoe an index of the absence of the children. The reduction to the barest minimum of objects and furniture brought special attention to the model of the village and the school. Rendered in white card it became a conceptual object; encased within the Architect's territory it is an appropriation. The blind Mother appears, drenched, in the Architect's office. She is out of place, looking as if she was transported from another time. She is guided to the model of the classroom, not as large as a shoebox; and as she reads its detail through touch, she recreates for the audience the village, its faces, its smells, sounds and emotions. The play shifts through the spoken, to the plane of feelings and experience.

In this chapter I reach back to prior productions in order to create a lineage of ideas and techniques used in the framing of meaning. These productions enacted conventional divisions between audience and performer, and yet audience relations can be conditioned by the treatment of the stage space, achieving a qualitative positioning implicating the audience in the imaginative process. In *Like a Fishbone* the audience sitting on three sides were made aware of each other's presence to

enhance the sense of a public forum. In part the question posed by the creative research pertains to the viability in a mainstream context of strategies developed for an 'alternative theatre.' Leading from this question is the question of whether the non-mainstream theatre must now present new challenges to a mainstream that readily absorbs the innovations of the alternative and the avant-garde into its repertoire of conventions.

The key strategies drawn from the past productions cited pertain to the attempt to condition the reception of meaning by an audience through manipulating the frame of the theatre experience. The creative research, the production of *Like a Fishbone* raised questions regarding the relative importance of form and content, of scenic writing over the play text. My findings in regard to these questions lead me to re-state the fundamental importance of considerations of framing in the evolving landscape of contemporary theatre practice. These framing strategies do not overwrite the history of theatre, its architecture, its relations and its language but conscript them. Of all the media for which storytelling is a component theatre has arguably become the least compelling, and I would argue that story delivery is no longer theatre's most potent function. When I go to the theatre to see Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, it is not for the story but to see what this group of artists have done with the text of *Hamlet*, how theatre language has been deployed, how they have dealt with the written text; how does the spoken word sit in relation to the scenography, the physical work, the sound world and the visual world. To put it more bluntly, I go to the theatre to see the theatre in action.

CONCLUSION

In concluding this thesis, the combined practical research project and exegesis, it has become apparent to me how important techniques of framing are in the creation of contemporary theatre. This period of research and reflection has been enormously beneficial in locating my own work and practice both within current practice and within a history of evolving strategies and processes. This has led to an accumulation of a more clearly defined set of rhetorical techniques that can be applied in my work as a methodology. The creative research period of *Like a Fishbone* was an invaluable opportunity to trial strategies in the re-making of the aesthetic framework of a text-based contemporary realism, in particular the animation of framing devices, in a

professional and mainstream context, a pressurised working environment with limited opportunity for reversal once decisions had been put in place. The hierarchies of theatre, of people and its parts, often compel compliance, creating an environment that is anything but liberated for the purposes of experimentation and as directors we are mindful to take the audience with us, to stretch the tolerances of the relationship without breaking it. But theatre direction can no longer be just a matter of interpreting the author's vision or staging the interpersonal through psychologically motivated action. It might instead be seen as the organisation or framing of all the elements which make up a live theatre event.

while the discoveries made through this research period pivot around *Like a Fishbone*, they are also informed through reflecting on the period of work before and after the production. My practice as a director, an educator and a researcher has evolved through this continuing investigation into the use of framing devices in theatre. By reflecting on my practice, I can identify a growing tendency to interrogate creative choices in order to test their potential to influence and disrupt the languages of theatre, thereby playing a part in its continuing vitality. The times require a means of addressing rapid cultural and social change including the rise of social and digital media. In this environment of accelerating change, which challenges traditional modes of representation, theatre cannot afford to sit and watch the train leave the station. In this century the frameworks defining identity, gender, politics and subjectivity have shifted. This thesis attempts to demonstrate that by manipulating frames of reference it is possible to shift the space of meaning. The conscious application of framing devices replaces the automatic acceptance of conventions in the attempt to wrestle with the space of meaning, to create new paradigms.

Through the literal and metaphoric framing of the theatre event; the re-organisation of the spatial relations between audience and performer/performance; the literal framing of the material theatre space; the ordering of relations through the distribution of objects and bodies across space and time; the application and use of shape, colour, texture; the literal appearance of the frame within the stage to delineate borders and divisions, and to meta-theatrically restate the distances between theatre world and the natural world, a meaning space is constructed. By provoking the imagination of the audience through clues of context, of association, of contiguity and of part objects,

they are activated in the fabrication of the play's meaning. Perhaps the potency of theatre is in the missing parts, which require and requisition audiences in a process of assembly and fabrication. This process refers to a making sense of the event, its circumstance, its location, and its relations, before any consideration of the 'content', the story, the literal setting, the character interrelations, or the element of moral persuasion.

The case studies cited range from relocations outside of traditional venues—in an attempt to stage a renewal or re-invigoration of theatre through a dislocation from the regulatory framework of theatre architecture and the proscenium arch—to productions staged within a conventionally divided stage and auditorium. In the course of this exegesis I have attempted to trace some of the shifts in emphasis in contemporary theatre, as evidenced in my own work, acknowledging the dialectical influence from both innovators and traditionalists. Movement through time is not strictly linear and neither is the evolution of theatre. Practitioners of theatre are searchers and gleaners, as much as they are inventors, and in their endeavor to make work they will beg, borrow and steal from theatre's archive. But to reference the past is different to an unthinking deference to cultural traditions.

The use of framing devices in contemporary theatre practice marks a turning back, a re-appraisal of theatre with all its historical baggage. This return, or looking back, permits an engagement with, rather than disavowal of the past and of history. It is precisely this dialectic that is bringing a new sense of potency to the practice of what Boenisch describes as 'theatricality' (2015, p.34). This re-engagement with the historical theatre led to the reiterations, or echoes of the proscenium frame: from the frame as stage in *Ursula* to the large light box frame in *Like a Fishbone* (figure 27). These frames become floating signifiers, pointing variously to the constructed nature of truth, the bounded versus the boundless, inside against outside, the walls of a prison or the circumscription of a lover's arms. We should not allow the conflicted territory of aesthetic difference to scare us into safe categories, as friction and contestation is the lifeblood of theatre. As Lehmann states, '[t]heatre and drama have existed, and still exist, in a relationship of tension- ridden contradictions' (2006, p.46).

In Frame 2. I addressed the attempt to re-contextualise the theatre experience through an interruption of the conventions that determine spatial relations between audience and actor. The proscenium arch, perceived at that time as an engine of audience passivity through its power to create division where there should be a union, was rejected in the search for a theatre that addressed the disempowerment of the spectator. In order to address this apparent disempowerment of audience through their constitution as spectators, alternative theatre practitioners devised ways to activate audiences by re-drawing the dividing line between performer and audience. More recently theorists such as Rancière have led to a reappraisal of the suppositions underpinning the politics of spectatorship allowing for a new perception of the audience who sits and watches. He notes that:

[d]istance is not an evil to be abolished, but the normal condition of any communication. Human animals are distant animals who communicate through the forest of signs' (2009, p10).

By attempting to narrow the distance between audience and actor, the distance that exists between people and things ironically became more apparent. But by re-framing the audience within the field of action their relation to the performance act is altered, the act of watching is implicated, objectivity is compromised, touch and smell and the experience of human proximity come into play. And yet the polarized ideological argument and the rejection of 'spectacle' is now engaged with less conviction, and what remains is a keener appreciation of the strategies employing distance and proximity in the spatial framing of theatre events, and the proposition that distance and division can be used as a part of the creative tool-kit rather than being a political problem. This in turn has changed the political and ethical considerations underlying my staging choices. Yet the re-location of theatre to non-traditional spaces had emerged also from a desire to reinvigorate text-based theatre and from a conviction that the form of engagement of audience and performer was key to a reception and perception of the meaning of the production. By changing the audience's configuration, they are incorporated into the theatrical world; they become a unit of the metaphoric machinery, a part of the structure of meaning. While there is a felt reality to their performance as a group it is a part of the playing, an extension of the make-believe. Promenade has now become an accepted choice of staging among

many others, but whether it can stage a communion or create communities is less easy to determine. Rancière (2009, p.16) re-evaluates forms of empowerment and notions of the communality or collective nature of the theatre experience arguing that:

The collective power shared by spectators does not stem from the fact that they are members of a collective body or from some specific form of interactivity. It is the power each of them has to translate what she perceives in her own way, to link it to the unique intellectual adventure that makes her similar to all the rest in as much as this adventure is not like any other.

The conventions of theatre are not written down in some dusty tome, they are a set of rules embedded in cultural identity. Its practitioners are regulated by their own observation of these and a variety of external forces. No art form is free from cultural, social and political influence and, while the theatre is in some sense a playground, it is also a contested and, at times, jealously guarded space with rules, boundaries, conventions and expectations. The expectation of others is a powerful instrument of control, and, as an industry in search of an audience, we play with this tension, desirous to engage but also to challenge and disrupt.

Like a Fishbone was staged on a raised thrust stage with its audience on three sides, the Wharf One Theatre is re-configurable and the decision to frame the audience/performer interaction in this way was based on a combination of aesthetic and pragmatic variables. At the time of the production the establishment of a critical distance seemed appropriate, while maintaining the audience awareness of their collective presence. Upon reflection, I might have taken another route, with the audience on all four sides of the action, clustered around a much larger model. The audience in this version would be addressed directly by the actors who would break character or would hardly appear to be in character. Or perhaps the action of the play could take place behind a glass wall, the wall of the intended memorial, building and accentuating the division implied by the proscenium arch. These ideas are purely speculative, because without going through a process of collaboration with a team of creative participants you can't know the end. These speculations are based on the outcome of a reflection upon the result of the initial creative research, which led me to the conclusion that the production might have dislocated itself further from the code

of Naturalism, the blind Mother appearing as if an unruly and uninvited protester among the audience come to interrupt the Architect's presentation.

In addressing meaning as a director in *Like a Fishbone* I was interested in going beyond the intended polemics of the play text—which could be paraphrased as, ‘Should we venerate victims of terrorism as heroes or mourn the pointlessness of their deaths?’—to a negotiation of the transmission of values through acts of representation which impact upon the rights of women and upon the freedom of expression which has become a bedrock of contemporary culture. In *Like a Fishbone* the problem was in recreating worn arguments that identify women as good or bad around mothering. The task was to provide a context for an argument to occur, the play's argument, without favoring or prejudicing any character position, to place the problem within the purview of the audience. I was attempting to stage the problem not an opinion. As makers of theatre we struggle constantly with the creation of meaning, swinging between the poles of a logocentric impulse to transmit clear and meaningful ideas and a wilder impulse to test the limits of the credible. Perhaps the theatre is best used to communicate sensibilities that are difficult to communicate in any other form. Goebbels suggests that as artists we should embrace the inconclusive and the unknown:

[b]ecause if artistic experience means the experience of the not-yet-seen, not-yet-heard, not-yet-understood, then perhaps it can only ever happen in a space not already occupied by things already understood. (2015, p.88)

It may be that the greatest art happens when the artist is prepared to un-know the world. It is difficult to un-know what is already known but the world is full of impenetrable mystery and it is a choice to follow either the path of the known or the unknown.

Frame 3. The Frame as Black Mirror, considered the frame for its ability to ‘show back’ to an audience, not a mimetic representation of reality, a fiction which pretends to mirror the time, place, space of reality, but a version of reality seen through a refractory lens through which one can see a distorted, perplexed version of customary perspectives. The black mirror interrupts the seamless act of looking. These two

approaches, mimesis or refraction, cannot be defined or differentiated by a tendency towards or away from abstraction, but by a polarised desire to either replicate or interrupt patterns of looking, or ways of seeing. *Like a Fishbone*'s design with its multiple frames suggests a multi-perspectival world. These literal and intersecting frames are linked by association to the model-box and to technical drawings, both of which represent an abstraction of a reality and condition a way of looking. The model-box encourages the observer to move around, to look from above, to take a position, to see it from a human perspective, while a technical drawing with its plan view and elevation make this adjustment for the viewer. This cubist-like fragmentation of point of view is intrinsic to the production's discourse about different ways of seeing; through vision, through touch, and vicariously through the relating of an experience. This realisation of the positioning power of the framing device in the representation of multiple points of view constitutes one of the findings of the period of creative research: that this multiplicity can be achieved literally through Promenade or other forms of immersive theatre, or metaphorically within a conventionally divided space.

Terminus, the case study cited in Frame 3, played with historical concepts of the stage as mirror, re-instituting the false perspective of the 17th Century theatre. By a trick of the eye the limited depth of the Red Shed space became a tunnel with no perceivable end. The creative research project advanced this realisation that the perceptual machinery of theatre can be organised to disrupt conventions of seeing, or at least bring the machinery of the watcher and the watched into the arena of awareness and contemplation. Thematically, both *Like a Fishbone* and *Terminus* dealt with an unnameable human urge to destruction, and by introducing ghosts both subvert the organising logic of the real. In *Like a Fishbone* the girl's ghost appears onstage, wet and actual, crossing the division implied by the frame separating living from dead. In a similar fashion the blind Mother's appearance at the play's opening, wet and wearing anachronistic clothes, 'out of time', has a jarring effect on the logic of the time frame, unnerving the certainty of contemporary belief systems. These productions used framing devices in order to recreate the languages of time and space, each employing its own particular strategies in order to shape meaning through the act of looking. These strategies form a critical function in contextualising the discourse as part of the work of scenography.

A scenographer has a different regard for a script than a director might, in that they design a playground and, in doing so, must consider the type of playing that the invented space proposes, the potential for playful interactions of the performers. There is no need yet to know the specific identities of the players or even the order of their play. As Lehmann notes, while contemplating the ‘civilization of images’ within a broader landscape of representation in dramatic theatre:

[it] is no longer just a matter of affirming and recognizing the independent achievement of the staging as an artistic design’ (2006, p.56). The recognition of the multi-form characteristic of contemporary theatre, with a foregrounding of scenography, and the work of scenographers, is key to the on-going evolution of theatre.

This foregrounding of scenography doesn’t imply necessarily the upending of the hierarchies that govern over the working process but a diffusion of the clear-cut divisions between the roles and an alteration in the hierarchy of the parts that combine to make up a theatre-work.

Theatre has long been a converging point for a number of art forms upon which it willingly and hungrily feeds. Frame 4 of this exegesis considers the interpolation into the frame of theatre of the frame of other art forms, disrupting the exclusive nature of its signing function. The theatre is already an intertextual zone by virtue of its composition as an assemblage of texts. To take this frictional potential further, the literal frames of page, screen and picture frame were enlisted in order to explore the juxtapositions and correlations created by these language systems when they are interposed into one another.

The projected image had served well in *Because You Are Mine* in staging lost time, playing forwards or backwards from the present. The ephemeral nature of its images represented the world of the dead, of ghosts; the characters are already memory traces in the real time of play. *Ursula* toyed with the picture frame and the portrait in a contemplation of the gap between self and image, and in the notion of the arrested moment of still life and photography. While in *(Uncle)Vanya* the frame of the page

represented the author's tyranny over characters who fight to rewrite themselves beyond the confines of Chekhov's imagination. The constraints and freedoms of the borrowed forms become useful metaphoric signs of the constraints and freedoms described within each of the play texts. *Like a Fishbone* carries the DNA of these productions in its use of frames within frames, in its use of projection, in the self-consciousness of the persuasive 'authority' of writing, and in the use of the frame of the still life to suggest entrapment, but greater still to reflect on the economies of status and power enacted through positioning the gaze.

Arguably theatre has become a poor cousin to screen-based forms in failing to turn the eye of an audience fully entranced by film, television and games, busily chatting on the forums of social media. Susan Sontag, writing in 1966, asks of an earlier challenge to the viability of theatre: 'Is cinema the successor, the rival, or the revivifier of the theatre?' She considers areas of interdependence between the two yet stops short of attributing a decline of interest in theatre to cinema:

One can't be sure that theatre is not in a state of irremediable decline, spurts of local vitality notwithstanding. But why should it be rendered obsolete by movies? It's worth remembering that claims of obsolescence amount to declaring that a something has one peculiar task (which another something may do as well or better). Has theatre one peculiar task or attribute?
(Sontag 2005, p.371)

The endangered theatre is the one that tries to do what other forms do better, a theatre that merely continues on with a momentum derived from years of habit. Richard Schechner, rather than seeing threat, sees the new forms of communication as assisting the variety of sources of change and transformation, including the streaming of non-Western forms back into Western theatre:

The situation is presently one of rapid and dynamic hybridity on a global scale. In dozens of cities located on every continent, one can attend performances that span the gamut and display a wild salad of influences and styles—local, regional, global, traditional, and new. (Schechner 2000, p.5)

The theatre lives on alongside other more popular media, bringing them into its own space, and transforming in reaction to their influence and innovation. In Lehmann's words: 'Under the impression of new media, the old ones become *self-reflexive*' (2006, p.51). The theatre reflects on its own mechanics, its conventions, but chiefly it has become increasingly aware of the power of theatre as a metaphor.

In Frame 5 I have cited three past productions as case studies, *The Ecstatic Bible*, *The Architect's Walk* and *The Serpent's Teeth*, productions whose problem-solving processes provided a background to the staging of *Like a Fishbone*. These productions don't bear a message, but rather provide a space of meaning, an area within which the audience is freely encouraged to piece together their own meaning. The solutions in each case allowed the actual space of the theatre and the language of theatre to speak, as a shadowing or doubling of life. The material aesthetics of the theatre, the mechanical and material realities, need not be dressed and decorated out of sight; the only thing that theatre can do that the other media cannot is *be* theatre. As Keene (2007, p.9) suggests:

[Theatre] might be considered a lens through which certain propositions can be observed, propositions about reality; a place where a negotiation takes place, between everyday perceptions and imagination, between what is obvious and what is hidden; between what has been forgotten and what persists in the memory, between fear and recognition.

Theatre is an act of doubling—of the real and the fictional, of character with actor, of life with representation. Contemporary theatre is characterized by an ever-present doubling, a split fascination between its concrete, mechanical materiality and its illusionary, abstract, fictional and highly subjective elements, a theatre in a perpetual state of formal self-interrogation.

Perhaps ironically, the attraction to theatre as an art form comes from its poverty and its decay, not only the decay of its physical and material properties but its marking of time, the arrest of any given moment and the passing of that moment, a rehearsal for death. Maybe this is the abiding quality of theatrical space; before the actor's first entrance, with no sets, or utterance of any kind, the theatre space frames time's

passing. The exactness of digital media, while exemplifying a perfect reproducibility without consequent decay, has found it necessary to invent simulations of decay by scratching, fading and degrading as if our art forms need to mirror the way memories fade and distort, recollections which exaggerate and lie, bodies that age and change, and lives that will end. Art's primitive function had hinged around assuaging anxieties: that winter will end, that night will give way to day. Theatre exemplifies the child's game of 'here and gone', the mastery and acknowledgment through play of both absence and presence. *Like a Fishbone*, from its genesis in the site of The World Trade Centre destruction had announced its fascination with the 'here/gone' within its fragile fabric of reality built over a crater, an abyss.

In shifting the play's setting from 'an architect's office' with all the paraphernalia of the 'natural world' the play attempts to represent a non-material world, a blueprint of a world where nothing is fixed, a world of multiple perspectives requiring a rejection of the precepts of a theatre of naturalism. The rejection of precepts is a natural function of a constantly evolving art form, while the search for a specific language or idiom is constant. An approach to contemporary theatre involves the acceptance of the potential autonomy of each element that makes up a live event. Heiner Goebbels (2015, p.2), in the *Aesthetics of Absence*, talks of the influence of Gertrude Stein's theatre as a 'thing in itself':

This is a drama of perception, a drama of one's senses, as in those quite powerful confrontations of all the elements—stage, light, music, words—in which the actor has to survive, rather than act. So the drama of the 'media' is actually a twofold drama here: a drama for the actor as well as for the perception of the audience.

We no longer struggle with the concept of a wordless theatre or even a theatre with no performers consisting solely of an activation of the audience. The 'drama for the actor' can be transferred to the audience, Lehmann cites a performance, *No Time for Art* by Egyptian artist Laila Soliman, in which the audience are invited to read from a piece of paper an account of the killing of a civilian in the mass demonstrations in Cairo in 2011. Lehmann (2013, p.89) describes the experience as an exemplar of the possibility of the tragic theatre in our times:

There is no performance, no theatre, no acting out of a dramatic story. But there is the audience—our voices in a public space, our silence, our listening, our common moment of ‘*Eingedenken*’ (remembrance).

Liberation, be it personal, political or artistic, is part of the abiding dream of theatre, whether that dream is fantastical or practical. As students of drama, Artaud’s dream of artists who would be ‘like victims burnt at the stake, signalling through the flames’ (1958, p.13), articulated in *The Theatre and its Double*, had seemed an impossible ideal—a poetic ambition rather than a template. Yet this expression of the dual function of feelings and signs has left an indelible mark on the quest for a contemporary theatre that matters. The theatre however is and must be allowed to be a broad church; no one can say exactly how it should look or work. It is plurality, an evolution. Like all art forms, it involves both control and loss of control, repetition and inspiration. At times it is easier to say what it should not be, Barker (2005, p.64) renounces the function of theatre to persuade, educate or influence:

In discarding the baggage of sordid ambitions that identified *the theatre*—the dispensing of ‘truth’, the ‘correction of attitudes’, the ‘giving’ of pleasure—*the art of theatre* creates an immunity for itself. Immunity from what? All *transactions*...

In rejecting the standard economies, Barker suggests a relationship to theatre that runs deeper than instruction, pointing to more ancient forms of theatre whose rituals addressed spiritual needs rather than the desire to be educated or entertained. This rejection of the transactional role of theatre questions the theatre’s relationship to ‘meaning’, and its function as transmitter of ‘messages’, in its historical role as a space of moral arbitration.

More recently, working in a university context I have brought my research on framing devices to bear on canonical dramatic texts, I have begun to scratch away at these texts, mutating the language into modern contexts and idioms. From the discursive potential suggested by the text I begin to consider each element separately, looking for potential counterpoint or contradiction. In this way, a work obtains the capacity to

critically reflect on itself and its manner of production. These productions have involved the reworking of texts from the classical canon including, Shakespeare, Gorky and Chekhov. The productions are respectful of the original texts but do not attempt to recreate them as historical artefacts. In bringing a contemporary aesthetic frame to ancient texts, they obtain new life and no longer speak through a veil of stale conventions. As Lehmann (2006, p.48) points out:

‘Drama’ is not just an aesthetic model but carries with it essential epistemological and social implications: the objective importance of the hero, of the individual; the possibility of representing human reality through language, namely through the form of stage dialogue; and the relevance of individual human behaviour in society.

Though Lehmann is positing alternatives to the dramatic, it is precisely these epistemological implications that maintain the enduring and resurgent interest in working with text. In *Ant & Cleo*⁷, Cleopatra leads Anthony onstage on all fours with a dog’s collar and lead foregrounding masochist elements within the play, suggesting new ways in which the play can be read potentially subverting the hegemony of masculinity that often pervades productions of Shakespeare’s plays, and indeed all plays which normalise the processes of identity generation through reiterative paradigms of gender and power.

⁷ Based on Shakespeare’s *Anthony and Cleopatra*, a graduate production adapted by Mark Rogers and featuring students from University of Wollongong, performed at PACT Theatre, Sydney 2011



Figure 21: Jackson Davis in *Ant & Cleo*, after William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, adapted by Mark Rogers, PACT Theatre, direction and design by Tim Maddock, 2011 (Photograph by the author)

Working with students in a laboratory style, texts are subjected to an interrogation into their form and their themes followed by experimentation into how these might be articulated spatially, using the mechanics and languages of theatre. A production of *Far Away* by Caryl Churchill staged under fluorescent lights in the university office corridors or Marius von Mayenberg's *Perplex*, a subversion of the bourgeois drama, with terrible domestic furniture crammed into various configurations in a continually changing landscape concertinaed between three frames each of diminishing stature on wheels.

The period after *Like a Fishbone* has led to a desire to take the formal elements of disruption further, to break more openly the unities of time and space, to peer through the fourth wall at the audience, to break character, and to encourage others, in my role as an educator to step around and to play with the boundaries of convention.

The theatre has the power to reposition its audience, and that can happen literally or figuratively, but I believe it is important that it happens. The theatre is a secular church and a broad church, and it has the potency to administer to the soul. It is both a

ritual and a prayer for believers and non-believers alike and like a church it needs to attend to its audience. Through this process of creative research, I have realized that we provide a framework within and around which the audience composite their own inventions and construct their own significations. That as artists we need to relax our grip in order for our work to have its own breath, to relinquish authority and to allow it to take its own steps and to watch it with the same breathless expectation that we want to instill in an audience. Search for new forms of creation and expression will continue, audiences will bring their ideas, desires, and agendas to the theatre in order to engage with the work on their own terms. They will use it as a model, a design for living, and a place to try things out. It will remain part dream and part experiment, because—like mad scientists—we can build our monsters, but only in the serious play and safe confines of the theatre.

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